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THE OCCULT LIFE AND MYSTERIOUS DEATH OF NETTA FORNARIO

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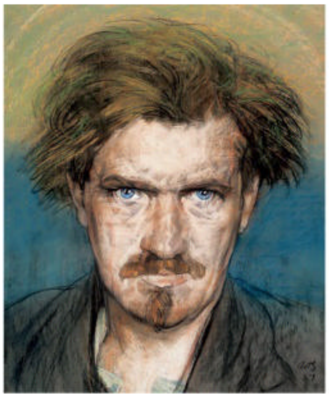
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Everything you always wanted to know about *Fortean Times* but were too paranoid to ask!

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COVER
ETIENNE GILFILLAN
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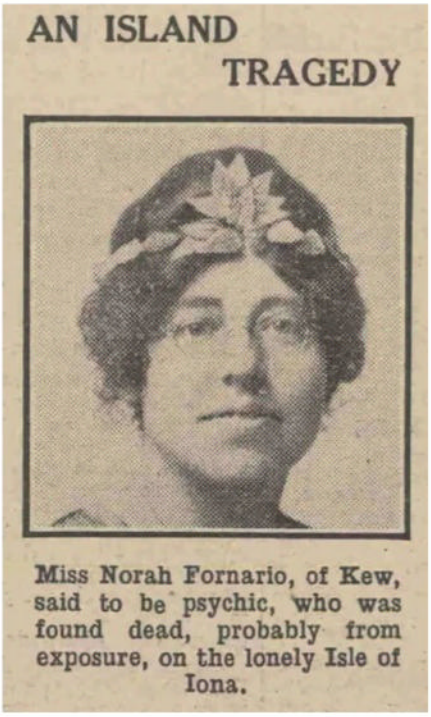
EDITORIAL

CAPUCINE DESLOUIS

AWAY WITH THE FAIRIES

Welcome to our April issue, in which Nina Antonia tells the strange, sad story of Netta Fornario, whose mysterious death on the Scottish island of Iona made headlines around the world 100 years ago. Nina paints a vivid picture of the British occult scene of the era, and the concurrent fascination with fairy lore, that shaped the young Netta's life and probably contributed to her lonely death. Elsewhere, Noel Rooney tries to make sense of the alleged 'Zizian' murder spree and another scenario in which unconventional beliefs appear to have contributed to a deadly outcome, although not just for the believers this time, and Clive Bloom, introducing his new book *London Uncanny*, ponders the hidden Gothic currents that run beneath the surface of the capital.



AN ISLAND TRAGEDY

Miss Norah Fornario, of Kew, said to be psychic, who was found dead, probably from exposure, on the lonely Isle of Iona.

We recently received sad news of the death of Ted Harrison, who will be known to readers as a regular contributor to this magazine over many years. While our thoughts are with Ted's wife and family, we are very pleased to be able to publish one of his final FT articles in this issue, in which he looks at the abiding myths – and possible reality – of 'beyuls', Tibet's hidden magical valleys. Before Christmas we also learned of the death of another long-time FT contributor, Merrily Harpur, a woman of many talents who will be best known to readers as a committed, and sometimes controversial, chronicler of Britain's big cat mystery; her last piece of writing – about the psychic abilities of her mother and grandmother – appeared in these pages last year (**FT445:50-51**), and like Ted she will be greatly missed by us all. Full obituaries for both Ted and Merrily will appear in future issues.

ON THE CARDS

If this month's cover story has whetted your appetite for all things esoteric, then you might want to get along to London's Atlantis Bookshop, which is mounting an exhibition entitled "Tarot Then & Now", highlights of which include the 'Pam-A' edition of the Rider Waite Smith deck (based on the teachings of the Golden Dawn) and an Etteila deck circa 1920, as well as original artwork from various other decks and two portraits of Austin Osman Spare. There will also be a series of talks on Wednesday afternoons. You may also get the chance to say hello to the bookshop's co-owner Bali, who did such a wonderful job of portraying the unfortunate Netta Fornario for this issue's cover.

The exhibition is The Atlantis Bookshop, 49A Museum Street, London, WC1 1LY until 30 April; Mon-Sat 10.30-18.00/Wednsdays until noon. Go to www.theatlantisbookshop.com for further details.

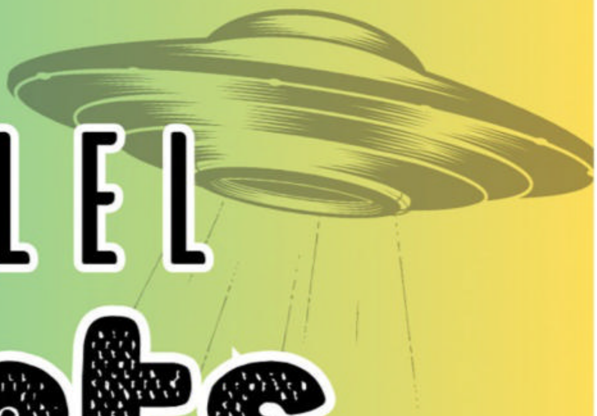
PARANORMAL SURVEY

Dr Urszula Wolski is carrying out research on investigators of paranormal phenomena and is interested in hearing about your experiences and beliefs as an investigator, whether you are currently investigating or no longer doing so. What follows is a link to a brief questionnaire which shouldn't take longer than 10-15 minutes to complete, depending on your answers, and all responses are completely anonymous.
https://forms.gle/LpZvJyTUrHqdGtDR9

ERRATA

FT450:47
The main photograph illustrating Rob Gandy's "Oh, whittle, and I'll come to you" was said to show "Samuel Wilkes with his record-breaking chain made of matchsticks". Dave Wrighting emailed from Massachusetts, saying "I can't help thinking he used a very large matchstick to make his chain!" The photo, as Rob Gandy confirms, in fact shows Wilkes holding the "the record-breaking chain made form the 10-foot plank he whittled in America."

I'M STARTING A NEW PODCAST CALLED:



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Have you experienced any of these:

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My name is Kit and if you've ever had an experience you can't explain (and don't mind being recorded talking about it) please email me at: parallelplanetspodcast@gmail.com

I WILL NOT JUDGE YOU! I'M GENUINELY FASCINATED - HENCE WHY I'M STARTING THIS PODCAST!

A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

STRANGE DAYS

THE ZIZIAN MYSTERY

NOEL ROONEY tries to unravel a tangled web of murderous vegan weirdness

SONOMA COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE / NSTAGRAM

LEFT: Clockwise from top left: Gwen Danielson; Jack 'Ziz' LaSota; Alexander Leatham; Emma Borhanian (all seen in mugshots following their arrest after a protest in 2019 in Sonoma County; Felix 'Ophelia' Bauckholt; Michelle Zajko; Maximillian Snyder; Teresa Youngblut. **BELOW LEFT**: Border agent David Maland, killed in a shoot-out with Borhanian and Youngblut.

It began with a shootout on the border. On the day that President Trump was inaugurated, in the little border town of Coventry, Vermont, Teresa Youngblut and Felix Bauckholt, a German national who identified as 'Ophelia', were stopped by border patrol agents. Youngblut allegedly produced a gun and started firing, killing border agent David Maland. Youngblut was wounded in the ensuing exchange of fire and Bauckholt was killed.

The pair had been under surveillance for about a week, after reports that they and a third person had been seen acting suspiciously in the town of Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Specifically, they appeared to be rehearsing some kind of tactical manoeuvre, and witnesses claimed that at least one of them was armed. Bauckholt had been living in Chapel Hill for a couple of years and Youngblut had joined him in late 2024. They rented a couple of townhouses from a local who reported weird behaviour and a distinct sense of threat from them.

LaSota's posts became increasingly violent in intent

D. MALAND
BORDER PATROL
FEDERAL AGENT

DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

The news caused very little stir in legacy media (it had a lot to compete with), but gradually details began to emerge in online forums; and those details were more than a little strange. Youngblut and Bauckholt were, it was claimed, connected to a group of determinedly non-binary, radical vegan activists, with a particular animus for AI, as well as all meat eaters. The group was an outlier to the Rationalist movement, a brand of philosophy promoted by IT mavens and particularly popular among the digiterati in California.

The Zizians, as they are known (it is not clear if they use the name themselves), follow the writing and thinking of Jack LaSota, a person well known among the rationalists for her/their (there is some confusion over LaSota's pronoun preferences) left-field views, and the subject of dire warnings from some of the movement's leading figures.

Ziz, as LaSota signed the posts, appeared to call for the deaths of a very long list of people, and espoused a 'no surrender' attitude in respect of the authorities; the posts, which started in 2016, became increasingly violent in intent. And there appears to be some substance to the Ziz list; the Zizians, despite numbering no more than eight people, have left a tragically impressive trail of bodies across the USA.

In November 2022, an elderly, small-time trailer park owner named Curtis Lind was called to a trailer occupied by three members of the group on the pretext of a plumbing problem. Emma Borhanian, Alexander Leatham and Suri Dao had been living there rent-free for some years, protected by the Covid lockdown moratorium on evictions. When Lind turned up, he was attacked with knives and a Samurai sword. Allegedly they were afraid he was going to finally evict them.

Impaled on the sword, and blinded in one eye from a stab wound, Lind managed to pull out a gun to defend himself.

LIVE LONG AND PROSPER

Longevity tips from the super-centenarians

PAGE 8

SCREAMING MUMMIES

And other archæological oddities

PAGE 12

THE SAVAGE SEAS

Man slurped up and spat out by a whale

PAGE 23

ALLEGANY COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE / ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE LEFT: Jack LaSota and Michelle Zajko after their arrest on 16 February. **ABOVE RIGHT**: Maximilian Snyder appears in court on 6 February. **BELOW**: Curtis Lind, who was stabbed and blinded by Borhanian and Leatham and later killed by Snyder.

Borhanian was killed in the melée. After several months in hospital, Lind, now extremely frail, was attacked by another member of the group, Maximillian Snyder, and killed. According to witnesses, Snyder stabbed him several times, walked away, and then returned and slit the unfortunate Mr Lind's throat to ensure he was dead. Snyder is now in custody, along with Leatham and Dao.

Here, another figure enters our story, also a Zizian, called Michelle Zajko. Zajko's parents, Richard and Rita Zajko, were found dead in their Pennsylvania home, from gunshot wounds. Suicide was ruled out and, according to some reports, Ziz was briefly detained as a person of interest in their murders. Meanwhile Michelle Zajko is suspected of supplying the guns that Youngblut and Bauckholt used in the border shooting.

At least one member of the group is reported to have committed suicide, and both Ziz and another member, Gwen Danielson, are alleged to have faked their own deaths in 2022. Quite how many Zizians there were, or there are now, appears to be an open question, though most sources identify eight people as members, living and dead.

Fast forward to 16 February; police raided a hideout in Frostburg, Maryland, and arrested Ziz (LaSota), Zajko and one Daniel Blank. They have been charged with a number of offences (it transpired that at least one of the three was armed when they were apprehended) and police forces from various states are compiling evidence to link them to the series of killings. After a brief court appearance, where Ziz claimed they were being fed the wrong food in prison and requested a proper vegan diet, all were remanded without bail.

And that, for the moment, would appear to account for all the members of what many have (loosely and in my view wrongly) called a cult. Five people are dead, two of them Zizians, two fake deaths have muddied the legal waters, but for now the killing spree is at an end. The trail from a frankly deranged blog suggesting that the two halves of the brain can be different genders, and mutually hostile to the point they want to kill each other, has wandered down a terminal rabbit hole.

The story is unlikely to end there, however. Trial proceedings – once the lawyers have worked out who did what and in which state – are likely to uncover more lurid details of the group's activities and beliefs; such as the idea that you can get half of your brain to sleep while the other half stays awake, or that eating meat is the most egregious form of murder, or that we must kill AI before it kills us.

Silicone Valley is, famously, home to a class of neuro-divergent geniuses and mavericks, busy kick-starting the apotheosis of intelligent machines. Quite how they spawned a posse of murderous vegans and terminal Luddites is a mystery that is currently opaque to any form of intelligence, artificial or otherwise. *https://sfist.com/2025/01/29/suspect-and-possible-cult-member-makes-court-appearance-in-vallejo-killing-as-further-links-revealed-to-other-murders/; www.breakingnews.ie/world/alleged-leader-of-cult-like-zizian-group-held-without-bail-1731484.html*

EXTRA! EXTRA!

FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

UNICORN RESTAURANT REDEVELOPMENT GETS GO-AHEAD AFTER REFUSAL OVERTURNED

Irish Times, 12 Oct 2024.

Reviving dead journalists with AI not the way to go

Irish Times, 1 Oct 2024

PLANE LANDS FOR FIRST TIME IN TWO YEARS

Hull Daily Mail, 14 Dec 2024.

66-million-year-old fish vomit discovered in Denmark

BBC News, 28 Jan 2025.

BELGIANS WARNED NOT TO EAT OLD CHRISTMAS TREES

Times, 8 Jan 2025.

SIDELINES

LESSON LEARNED?

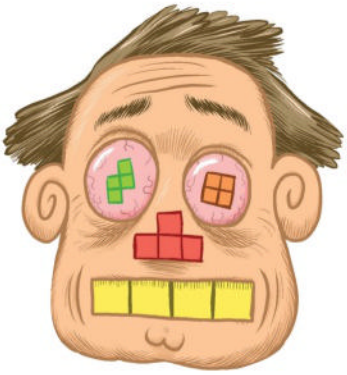
Perhaps learning from the case of Laura Riley, who was arrested after police found her with a bag of drugs prominently labelled "Bag of Drugs", Mia Baggenstos, 37, and Reginald Reynolds, 35, put their drugs in a bag labelled "Definitely not a bag full of drugs". This did not fool the police officers who pulled over their stolen car in Portland, Oregon, and arrested them for unlawful possession of methamphetamine and driving a stolen vehicle. *oregonlive.com, 10 Oct 2024.*

HOW?

On holiday in Croatia, Amber Hunt, 38, managed to swallow a 20cm (8in) toothbrush. She was brushing the back of her mouth with wet hands, and the brush slipped into her throat, she says. Hunt tried to grab it but ended up swallowing it. Hospital medics initially didn't believe she could have swallowed a toothbrush, but changed their mind after an ultrasound scan. They then used an endoscope to wangle it back up, without anæsthetic. Hunt said she was "lucky to be alive," adding, "I have my throat stretched every few months, so I think that is why it didn't get stuck." *mirror.co.uk, 6 Aug 2024.*

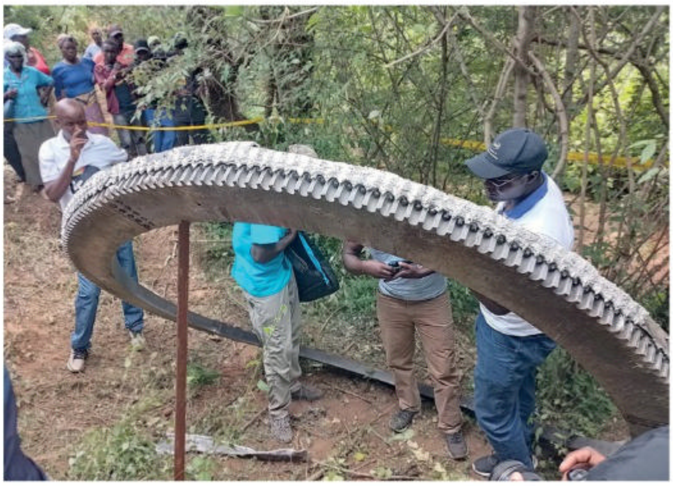
TETRIS TRIUMPH

Despite its ubiquity, Michael Artiaga, 16, is the first person on record to beat the computer game Tetris by completing all the levels so that it resets to level zero again, previous attempts having been thwarted by crashes and kill screens. Artiaga achieved the historic 'rebirth' while livestreaming himself playing Nintendo's version of the game on Twitch, taking 82 minutes to successfully clear all 255 levels. Having achieved victory he said: "I'm so glad that game is over – I never want to play this game again." *BBC News, 8 Oct 2024.*


MARTIN ROSS

OUT OF THE SKIES

Mystery metal from the heavens and more meteorite near-misses


KENYA SPACE AGENCY

ABOVE: Residents of Mukuku and staff from the Kenyan Space Agency examine the mystery metal ring. **BELOW**: The chunk of metal that smashed through the roof of Alejandro Otero's house in Florida.

KENYAN CONUNDRUM

Residents of Mukuku in southern Kenya were startled by a large metallic ring that crashed into the village at roughly 3pm on 30 December 2024, fortunately without injuring anybody. The ring, which was described as "red hot" when it landed, was eight feet (2.5m) in diameter and weighed around 1,100lb (500kg), and as soon as authorities became aware of it, the Kenya Space Agency (KSA) "secured the area and retrieved the debris for further investigation". They went on to issue a statement saying that they believed it was "a separation ring from a launch vehicle (rocket)," adding that these "are usually designed to burn up as they re-enter the Earth's atmosphere or to fall over unoccupied areas, such as the oceans."

Suspicion fell on an incoming rocket body associated with an Atlas Centaur launch from 2004 that was predicted to re-enter on 30 December, with a flight path taking it over Africa. However, its predicted re-entry was several hours later, and indeed it was tracked by the US Space Force as re-entering over Lake Baikal in Russia that evening. Jonathan McDowell from the Harvard–Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics, though, said he felt there was "no obvious space candidate. I am not convinced it's not from an airplane. I don't see obvious evidence of re-entry heating."

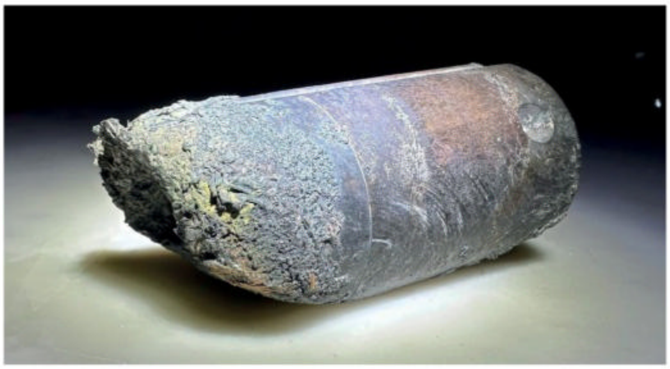
Although the item was red hot on landing, it did not appear to show the kind of surface damage usually associated with re-entry, nor had it broken up as such rings usually do, remaining in remarkably good condition for orbital debris. Fingers were also pointed at Russian Roscosmos rockets as the item superficially resembled parts of their Angara-A5M rocket, but the size of the ring was well within the range that space agencies are able to track, and no Roscosmos debris was believed to be re-entering at the time. As a result, the object remains unidentified and in the custody of the KSA. *space.com, 2 Jan 2025.*

HOMING INSTINCT

On 8 March last year Florida homeowner Alejandro Otero was on holiday when a large chunk of metal smashed through his roof, tore through two further floors of his house and almost hit his son, who called him to say: "Something ripped through the house and then made a big hole on the floor and on the ceiling." Otero said, "When we heard that, we were like, impossible, and then immediately I thought a meteorite," but when he got home, he found the object was cylindrical, metallic, and weighed nearly two pounds (0.9kg). Otero contacted NASA, who took the object away for analysis, after which they concluded that it was debris released from the International Space Station (ISS) two years before, part of a pallet of nickel hydride batteries jettisoned in March 2021. NASA calculations had indicated that the 5,800lb (2,630kg) pallet would re-enter over the Gulf of Mexico, south of Florida, instead of over Otero's home in Naples, near the Kennedy Space Centre from which it had originally been launched, and would burn up on re-entry rather than leave chunks to hit the ground. *yahoo.com, 16 Apr; msn.com, 3 Apr 2024.*

ICE IN THE SUN

Florida resident Mike Bishop got a significant shock too, when a massive chunk of ice fell from the sky onto his house in Seminole Woods at 3.39pm on 3 February. The block slammed into his roof, smashing a huge hole and scattering lumps of ice all over the roadway, with some striking a neighbouring house. The Palm Coast Fire Department said: "Upon arrival crews discovered a hole in the metal roof and remnants of ice that


ALEJANDRO OTERO

JOSEPH WALSHE / SWNS

LEFT: Paul Butler and his son Nathan with a suspected meteorite at their home in Stratford-upon-Avon.

had penetrated into the living quarters." No one was injured by the impact, and Bishop and his family were able to remain in their home after a tarp was put over the hole. As the ice was white, rather than blue, it is not thought to be frozen leakage from an aircraft lavatory, but the Federal Aviation Authority said there is probably a simple explanation: "Water may leak out and form ice on the outside of an aircraft, as the aircraft descends and the temperature warms, the ice can melt and fall off." However, so far their investigations have failed to identify any aircraft overhead at the time from which the ice might have fallen. *nypost.com, 5 Feb 2025.*

CREAMED

After loading groceries into their car at a Walmart in Lehighton, Pennsylvania, at around 4.05pm on 17 May 2023, a couple were shocked when a rock shattered the window of their vehicle. It smashed through the safety glass, through a sticker commemorating a grandson who had been killed by a drunk driver, and through a tinted film on the inside of the window, ending up in a 1.5-quart (1.41-litre) container of Breyers Natural Vanilla Ice Cream on the back seat. The police were called, and started investigating the damage as a case of vandalism, keeping the 1.5 x 2.5-inch (4x6.4cm) rock.

When they looked at CCTV footage they could see that the rock hit the car at high speed, but could not see any evidence that someone had thrown it, and indeed, could make out a smoky trail in the sky along the path the rock had taken. They were, however, reluctant to conclude that it was a meteorite, because although it fell during a known meteor shower, anything actually being hit by one is extremely rare. The rock was then returned to the car owner, who "contacted several prominent institutions" for identification. Most turned them down, but the Pennsylvania State Museum agreed to give it a try, and handed it over to several retired members of the Pennsylvania Bureau of Geological Survey with experience of telling meteorites from 'meteorwrongs'.

After several rounds of careful testing, they were able to confirm that the rock was an achondrite meteorite that had a multi-stage history, and the owners donated it to the museum. *"The 'Ice Cream Drop' Meteorite", Robert C Smith II, John H Barnes, James T Herbstritt, Pennsylvania Geology 54:4; https://sharonahill.com/a-meteor-falls-in-pennsylvania-and-lands-in-ice-cream/sharonhill.com.*

WARWICKSHIRE WHAMMY

And it is not just in the US that meteorites have it in for cars. On Boxing Day, Paul Butler, 55, and his family were watching TV at home in Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, when they heard a loud bang outside. At first they dismissed this as fireworks, however, when Butler went out the next morning, he found that his parents' car, parked on his drive, had a shattered windscreen. Butler's son, Nathan, 12, was with him, and, looking around, he found a small black stone about 2cm (0.8in) across near the car which was unlike any others in the gravel drive. He suspected this was a meteorite and responsible for the damage, so after some online research, he tested it with a magnet, and, finding the stone was magnetic, concluded it must be a meteorite, although this has not been confirmed by experts.

"It is the only logical explanation for what caused the damage, because it wasn't there when my dad drove into the driveway," said Butler. "The impact looks like it splintered the glass and made a fair bit of damage, but it's very lucky no one was inside at the time." *warwickshireworld.com, 14 Jan 2025.*

AUDIO FIRST

Returning to his home in in Marshfield, Prince Edward Island, Canada, after taking his dogs for a walk, Joe Velaidum was surprised to find unusual dark debris all over his front path and lawn, which had not been there when he left a short time before. Checking his home security camera, he was startled to see something smash into the paving stones, shattering on impact "with a reverberating smack", spraying debris across his property, just moments after he left. A friend suggested that this might be a meteorite, so Velaidum collected a sample of the material and sent it to Chris Herd, meteorite collection curator at the University of Alberta. Herd analysed the debris and was able to confirm that is was a meteorite, a chondrite, which is the most common kind.

What was exciting, though, was that Velaidum's CCTV had caught both the moment of impact and the sound, as there is no previous recorded audio of a meteorite striking a human-made object. "It's not anything we've ever heard before. From a science perspective, it's new," Herd said. "It's really awesome. It's actually the first and only meteorite ever found on the Island, and what a way to make that discovery." Herd estimated that the meteorite would have been travelling at at least 124mph (200km/h) when it impacted, with Velaidum saying "The shocking thing for me is that I was standing right there a couple of minutes right before this impact – it probably would've ripped me in half." *cbc.ca/news, 13 Jan 2025.*

SIDELINES

TELEPORTATION?

Anne Elliot from Tennessee was baffled when the package of clothing that arrived from fashion retailer Shein also contained a "dented can of Mexican beans and a vial of human blood". The vial was from a company that carries out medical testing, who are mystified as to how it got into Elliot's parcel, while Shein said that when the package left them "it contained only the items in the order." After Elliot contacted the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) they described the incident as a "major biohazard" and sent the local police to collect the vial. They left the beans though. *people.com, 15 Mar 2024.*

YAK ATTACK

Emma Keen, 42, from Bridgend in South Wales, was on her way to climb Mount Everest but ended up in hospital before she got anywhere near the mountain. She was showing her family a yak on Facetime when the normally peaceful creature charged her. "It threw me in the air, and I landed back down with a thud," she said. Fellow climbers rescued her as the yak came at her a second time. Bleeding heavily, she was helicoptered out to hospital where she needed 10 stitches in her leg where the yak had gored her. *Sun, 26 Mar 2024.*

FIENDISH!

Police in Sydney, Australia, discovered an ingenious device used by a gangster to conceal his gun. In his bathroom there was a light switch that was not connected to any electricity. Instead, it could be removed to reveal a recess containing another switch, which, when pressed, opened a hidden panel elsewhere in the bathroom wall containing the gun. *S.Telegraph (Sydney), 19 May 2024.*

ANIMAL HUSBANDRY

Activists from the Farm Transparency Project installed a secret camera at Midland Bacon in Victora, Australia, to capture "illegal industry practices". To their surprise, it filmed a 30-year-old man performing a sex act on a pig. They turned the video over to police, who charged the man with bestiality. *Gold Coast Bulletin (Aus), 13 Mar 2024.*

SIDELINES...

ART CANNED

A lift technician at the LAM Museum in Lisse in the Netherlands mistakenly threw away one of their artworks, *All the good times we spent together* by Alexandre Lavet, consisting of two apparently discarded beer cans. They had, however, been "meticulously hand-painted with acrylics, with each detail painstakingly replicated". The museum did not blame the temporary technician as he was not to know that the work, displayed in the corner of a lift, was not rubbish. The cans were successfully retrieved from the bin and returned to their place. *editions.cnn.com, 8 Oct 2024.*

TIME TWISTERS

Self-described 'therapists' Rajeev and Rashmi Dubney from Kanpur in India are being sought by police over claims they could reverse damage caused by "excessively polluted air" using an "Israeli-made time machine" and oxygen therapy. They persuaded at least two dozen people that this would reverse ageing by up to 20 years and even restore damaged internal organs, pocketing at least 350 million rupees (£3.3m) in the process. They promised visible results within months, but skipped town before the time came, leaving clients angry, out of pocket, and no younger. *odditycentral.com, 8 Oct 2024*.

NUTS OF STEEL

The 2024 World Conker Championships were riven with controversy when victor David Jakins, 82, was accused of cheating after a steel conker, painted brown, was found in his pocket. It was veteran conker player Jakins's first win, although he has competed since 1977, earning him the title 'King Conker', but suspicions were raised by his final opponent, Alastair Johnson-Ferguson, who said his conker "disintegrated in one hit, and that just doesn't happen." Jakins responded that he had the steel conker for "humour value" and dismissed the cheating claim as "a load of nonsense". He was later cleared of wrongdoing. *news.sky.com, 15 Oct 2024*.

MARTIN ROSS

LIVE LONG AND PROSPER

Supercentenarians share their secrets

ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

HALLMARK CARE HOMES

ABOVE LEFT: Tomiko Itooka, celebrating her 116th birthday; she was briefly the world's oldest living person. **BELOW**: Inah Canabarro, 116, has now taken the title. **ABOVE RIGHT**: Ethel Caterham, 115, Britain's oldest lving person.

The world's official oldest person, Maria Branyas Morera, died on 19 August 2024 at the age of 117 years 168 days, with Guinness World Records saying, "Maria passed away peacefully at the nursing home in Catalonia, Spain, where she resided for the past two decades". Born in the US, Morera had lived in Spain for most of her life. She was the eighth longest lived person on record and had been granted the title in January 2023 after the death of French nun Sister André, who reached the age of 118.

Morera remained free of cancer, dementia and heart problems until the end and believed she had lived a long life thanks to "order, tranquillity, good connection with family and friends, contact with nature, emotional stability, no worries, no regrets, lots of positivity, and staying away from toxic people". Aided by her daughter, Morera was active on X (Twitter) where she had thousands of followers; her bio on the platform read: "I am old, very old, but not an idiot." She was also thought to have been one of the oldest people to have survived Covid, having come down with an infection in May 2020. *editions.cnn.com, 20 Aug 2024.*

Morera was succeeded in this high-risk role by Tomiko Itooka from Japan, who was 116 when declared the World's Oldest Living Person, having been born on 23 May 1908. Rather less loquacious than her predecessor, her only public pronouncement was to say "thank you" to the news of her record. Itooka lived in a nursing home in the city of Ashiya and had two daughters and two sons. She had been an enthusiastic volleyball player in her youth and even into old age remained very active. She was fond of mountain climbing, tackling the 3,067m (10,062ft) Mount Ontake twice, wearing trainers rather than hiking boots, and in her 80s, she took part in the Osaka 33 Kannon Pilgrimage, visiting 33 temples; even at 100, she was ascending the many stone steps of the Ashiya Shrine unaided by a cane. Itooka only held the record briefly, though, dying on 29 December 2024.

> *"I'm young, pretty and friendly – all good qualities"*

Next, the baton was taken up by Inah Canabarro, another nun, this time from Brazil, whose age was confirmed as 116 by the Gerontology Research Group. Born on 8 June 1908, just 16 days after Itooka, Canabarro ascribed her longevity to her Catholic faith; she also told visitors: "I'm young, pretty and friendly – all very good, positive qualities that you have too." *euronews.com, 22 Aug 2024; theguardian.com, 4 Jan; news.sky.com, 5 Jan 2025.*

LONGEVIQUEST

CANAL VUE CARE HOME / SWNS

ABOVE: Donald Rose, 110, Britain's oldest living man, with the medals awarded to him after WWII including the Legion D'Honneur.

It has been all change among the UK's supercentenarians too. While Morera, Itooka and Canabarro also held the title of the World's Oldest Living Woman, John Alfred Tinniswood, from Southport on Merseyside, was the World's Oldest Living Man from April 2024 until his death at 112 years and 91 days on 25 November 2024, having been born on 26 August 1912. His family said he "had many fine qualities", adding, "He was intelligent, decisive, brave, calm in any crisis, talented at maths, and a great conversationalist." Tinniswood said that he had been "quite active as a youngster" and did "a lot of walking," but had no idea as to why he was blessed with such longevity. With Tinniswood's death, Britain's oldest living man became Donald Rose, 110, who was born 24 December 1914 and lives in Ilkeston, Derbyshire, while the World's Oldest Living Man record went to João Marinho Neto from Brazil. Neto was born on 5 October 1912, making him 112 years 52 days old when he was granted the record. He has spent his life farming in Fazenda Massapê and said the secret to his long life is being surrounded by good people and keeping his loved ones close by. *BBC News, 26 Nov; guinnessworldrecords.com, 28 Nov 2024.*

Britain's Oldest Living Person, though, remains Ethel Caterham, who has held the record since 2020. Aged 115, Caterham was born on 21 August 1909 in Shipton Bellinger in Hampshire and lives in a care home in Lightwater, Surrey. She is also Britain's Oldest Living Woman and, since the death of Maria Morera, Europe's Oldest Living Person; she is now the second oldest living person in the world too. Caterham is the last person alive from the reign of Edward VII, and one of the last people able to remember WWI. One of her sisters, Gladys, lived to the age of 104, and she has outlived her two daughters. Caterham drove until she was 97 and enjoyed playing contract bridge until she was well over 100. Asked the customary question about the secret to her longevity, she said it was down to "taking everything in my stride, the highs and the lows." *BBC News, 23 Aug 2024.*

Allegedly older than all these is Amantina dos Santos Duvirgem, also known as Dona Julia, from Serra Gaias, Brazil, who, it is claimed, is 124; older, even, than the official oldest person to have ever lived, Jeanne Calment, who lived to be 122. Duvirgem has been denied the record, however, as her birth certificate was only issued retrospectively when she applied for her pension, so cannot be properly verified. Duvirgem joins other extreme supercentenarians who lack documentation acceptable to organisations that grant the record, such as South African woman Johanna Mazibuko, who claims she was born in 1894, Saparman Sodimejo, an Indonesian man who was claimed to be 146 when he died, and Shirali Muslumov, an Azerbaijani shepherd who supposedly died at 168 in 1973. IgNobel Prize-winning research by gerontologist Saul Newman, however, has found that supercentenarian status correlates closely with poor documentation or economic hardship. In the US he found that when states introduced birth certificates, there was a 69-82% fall in the number of supercentenarians recorded, and that supercentenarian birthdates are suspiciously concentrated on days divisible by five, which suggests faking. Looking at Italy, England, and France, which have better registration, and at the "blue zones" of Sardinia, Okinawa, and Ikaria, supposedly remarkable for the longevity of their residents, Newman found that claims of longevity correlate with residence in places with poverty, low per capita incomes, shorter life expectancy, higher crime rates, worse health, higher deprivation and fewer 90+ year olds. They are also often made by people who have lived in remote, overseas, and colonial territories at some time. This led him to conclude that widespread pension fraud and error are likely to be behind most extreme longevity claims, even for many of those accepted by the relevant authorities, because deprived areas are more likely to create financial pressures than longer lives. *biorvxiv.com, 14 Mar 2024.*

For more recent round-ups of supercentenarians, see **FT383:10-11, 405:10, 409:10, 429:13, 455:4-5**.

SIDELINES...

TOO LATE

In an attempt to save their relationship, Veronica Gast, 30, from Otter Tail, Minnesota, agreed to couples therapy with her boyfriend. However, during an argument-filled journey to the therapist Gast forced her partner from the car and tried to run him over. He escaped with minor injuries and ended their relationship without needing a therapist's intervention. *D.Mirror, 24 Aug 2024.*

MONSTER TRUCK

When a speed camera in Dortmund caught a car doing 60mph in a 50mph zone, police zoomed in on the image to identify the driver, only to find it appeared to be the Cookie Monster from Sesame Street. They now believe the driver was deliberately trying to get snapped by the camera, and while they have identified the car's owner as a 57-year-old man from Hagen, he hasn't admitted to being the person in the Cookie Monster suit, who will get a fine of €40 (£35) when police catch up with him. *thesun.co.uk, 9 Oct 2024.*

CHAOS MAGNET

Police raided the NoHo Diagnostic Center medical imaging facility in Los Angeles on suspicion of it being an illegal cannabis farm, concerns having been raised by what seemed to be excessive electricity consumption in the building. As the first officer burst in, his rifle was wrenched from his hands by the immensely powerful magnet of an MRI scanner, ending up stuck to the machine and reducing the raid to chaos. The Center's owners were unimpressed and are suing the police department, saying "The whole operation was nothing short of a disorganised circus." *D.Mirror, 28 Sept 2024.*

VAPE ESCAPE

Faced with a drug cartel roadblock in Culiacan in Sinola, Mexico, an unnamed driver decided to put his foot down and run the gauntlet. The gunmen sprayed his Nissan with bullets, but these seemed to miss him entirely. Stopping at a car wash for help, the driver was shocked to find a bullet embedded in a vape in his trouser pocket. Had it not been there to stop the bullet, it would have severed his femoral artery, and he would have bled out in moments. *D.Star, 17 Sept 2024.*

SIDELINES...

OWN GOAL

Yeovil Town Football Club appalled fans by misspelling the town's name on their official merch. Packaging for the team's new £16 scarves leaves the 'I' out, spelling the town as "Yeovl". It also manages to spell "merchandise" without the 'r'. Angry fans spoke out, saying, "It's really sad, the fact that they can't even spell their own town right". *<i>, 20 Aug 2024.*

KEYHOLE SURGERY

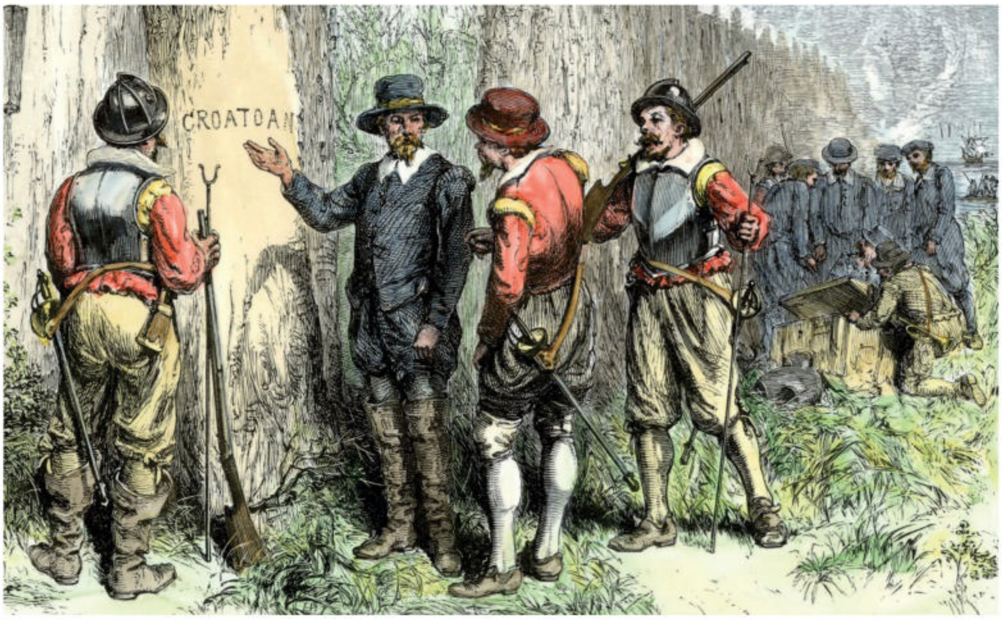
Searching for her keys, a woman from Motihari, in Bihar, India, asked her son, in his early 20s, if he knew where they were. He told her he'd swallowed them. Although she initially thought he was joking, a hospital scan revealed he really had, along with some nail clippers, a folding knife and other metal items. These were removed by surgery and the patient made a quick recovery. Both the doctors and the man's mother blamed excessive social media use for his actions. *nypost.com, 20 Aug 2024.*

FLUSHED

Washroom cleaning company Initial Hygiene surveyed its Irish clients to discover the strangest things flushed down their toilets. Among the weirdest were a dead cat, half a loaf of bread and an entire rotisserie chicken, but other unusual items included a wig, a rubber duck, a handbag, a whole pizza, and an empty gin bottle. Not flushed, but abandoned in public loos were handcuffs, a blow-up doll, a batman costume and a rocking horse. *Irish Independent, 17 May 2024.*

MARTIN ROSS

THE LOST COLONY FOUND?



ABOVE: The return of Governor White to the "Lost Colony"of Roanoke in 1590. **BELOW**: White's map of the area, "La Virginea Pars", with a piece of paper stuck over what new research reveals to be the symbol for a fort.

In 1587, Elizabethan adventurer Sir Walter Raleigh attempted to establish the first permanent English settlement in the Americas, the "Cittie of Raleigh", landing initially on Roanoke, an island off the coast of what is now North Carolina. Their ship carried 115 colonists including women and children and while an initial colony was successfully established, it had trouble becoming self-sufficient, so expedition leader John White sailed to England for more supplies in 1588.

However, his return to Roanoke was delayed by the Anglo-Spanish war, and he didn't make it back until 1590, by which time the colonists were nowhere to be seen. The only clue being the word "CROATOAN" carved into a wooden post. White took this to mean that they had relocated to nearby Croatoan Island, but before he could investigate further his ship was forced to return to England.

The colonists were never seen again, and no clear evidence of their fate has ever been found, although rumours of their massacre by indigenous people, death from disease, or their assimilation into local tribes circulated for years afterwards. Researchers have been looking for them ever since. Now, a map drawn by John White titled "La Virginea Pars", showing a stretch of the North Carolina coast south of Roanoke, may have yielded up a clue.

Chawanoac
Weapem
I

Examination of the map by British Museum curator Kim Sloan and paper conservator Alice Rugheimer revealed a blank spot on the map, which, on closer inspection was found to be a piece of paper stuck over something. Placing the map on a light box enabled them to see what the patch was hiding. Under it was the symbol for a fort. "I said to Alice, 'I think we just discovered the intended site for the 'Cittie of Raleigh'," Sloan said, "and then I think I swore."

This was located 100 miles south of Roanoke, near present-day Bertie County on the western end of Albemarle Sound, and, interestingly, the site was already known to archæologists as 'site 31BR246', which had been excavated some years previously. Artefacts from the site had caused considerable interest because they included fragments of Border Ware pottery, a ceramic of English manufacture dating back to the 16th century, along with a variety of other small artefacts of clearly English origin, suggesting that there had been some kind of colonist settlement on the site that had not been otherwise recorded.

Scans of the landscape did not reveal anything on the scale of the fort that White's map showed, but it is clearly a site intended for colonisation by his expedition. While the archæology shows it is unlikely that all the colonists relocated to this new site, it is clear some of them did, although rather than founding a city they were probably seeking help from the local Mettaquem villagers. *popularmechanics.com, 11 Dec 2024; dailymail.co.uk, 27 Jan 2025.*

CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

308: COME BACK, DAVID MELLOR

A tabloid headline of the day: '*MADE LOVE IN CHELSEA STRIP*'

For present purposes, that's all we need to say about David Mellor.

Donald Trump made history of a sort when he became the first sitting president to attend the Super Bowl game. Some hailed him for this; others objected. Can't see anything wrong with his being there. Didn't try to steal the limelight, nor did he dole out silverware as do our royals at Wembley. Not sure why he had no predecessors. Lack of personal interest? Security concerns? Perhaps significantly, the TV cameras never focused on him. Ronald Reagan did the Coin Toss in 1985, but from the safety of the White House's Map Room. Presidents routinely toss out the ceremonial first pitch at the World Series baseball finals. Canadian Prime ministers frequently perform a ritual First Kick at their Super Bowl equivalent, the Grey Cup.

Modern sports are largely about money and politics. As shall be seen, much the same in ancient Rome. Also, the People expected their emperors to both sponsor and attend the Games. Not that the rulers were the sole organisers. Junior officials and wannabes vie with each other in putting on public entertainments. In both fact and fiction, these did not always go well. Take this complaint by a spectator in Petronius' *Satyricon* (ch45 para11): "Honestly, what has Norbanus ever done for us? He put on some tenth-rate gladiators, well past their sell-by date, who'd have fallen flat if you'd breathed on them. I've seen better men fight the wild beasts. One was thin as a rake, another bandy-legged, another a living corpse, hamstrung for good measure. There was one Thracian-style fighter who had a bit of spunk, but he just did what his trainer told him. They were all flogged afterwards with the crowd shouting 'Lay It On Good!'. 'Still, I did give you a show,' Norbanus said. Sure you did, and I gave you a hand. But all in all, I gave you more than I got." Vox Populi, indeed…

His criticism of wild-beast fighters reminds me to say they lasted until the very late Empire, also that there is no evidence for men riding on rhinoceroses, as in *Gladiator II*.

In AD 27, an ex-slave called Atilius staged some games, not for political ambitions but simply to make money. So, he had an amphitheatre constructed, but, not himself having much money, he hired a bunch of cowboys who rushed the building up, cutting many safety corners. A huge crowd turned up, this being during the reign of Tiberius, who was notably stingy when it came to public entertainments. Things had hardly got going when the building collapsed. Fifty thousand men and women were killed or injured. An outraged Senate immediately legislated stricter construction rules, and drove Atilius into exile. Tacitus (*Annals*, bk4 chi 62-3) provides the full story, supplemented by Suetonius. See also the online article by C Keith Hensley.

While a junior magistrate, Julius Cæsar wanted to make a big entertainment splash, but (Suetonius's biography, ch10) the Senate was alarmed by the number of gladiators he planned, and rushed to impose a lower limit. Later, as Dictator with untrammelled power, he put on shows with thousands of combatants and wild beasts. He also put on the first recorded *Naumachia* (Mock Sea-Battle) as part of his quadruple triumph celebrations. Augustus and many other emperors followed suit. *Gladiator II* has a distinctly hotted-up one. Just how the Romans managed to flood amphitheatres (some were on artificial lakes) is still debated: Katherine Coleman is the person to read on this.

Claudius staged the most lavish such spectacle, but he hit a snag. The combatants lined up before the imperial box chanting, 'Hail, Cæsar, Those Who Are About To Die Salute You.' This is often taken to be a routine ritual, but Mary Beard sceptically thinks it was a One-Off. Anyway, trying to make a joke, Claudius replied, 'Or not, as the case may be." The gladiators promptly downed swords, thinking (or pretending to) they'd been excused. Claudius had to hobble around them with threats and promises, until they resumed their weapons and put on a good show. For a complete inventory of these engagements, with full source references, see the massive online article by Gunnar Richie.

Augustus in his official biography (*Res Gestae* = What I Did, chs22-3) includes this in his boastful list of the entertainments he paid for. It notably mentions two shows of 'world-famous athletes'. Augustus took a keen interest in the Greek Olympic Games, which were to many Roman tastes somewhat insipid compared with arena spectacles, albeit there was some attempt to spice them up with (e.g.) loaded boxing gloves. After Augustus, Domitian (AD 81-96) attempted to give them a new lease on life, along with his adding two new colours to the chariot-racing, which flopped as badly as had Claudius's three new letters for the Latin alphabet.

Caligula's idea of a prank was to have the sun-awnings taken down at the arena – these are promised in Pompeian advertisements for games. His own gladiatorial appearances were equally unsporting, his opponent being armed only with a wooden sword.

Commodus was the ultimate arena performer, having himself depicted as Hercules with a club, fond of shooting ostriches with 'special darts', once brandishing a severed head and neck close up to the senators, grinning maniacally. Dio Cassius says he chewed laurelled leaves to conceal his laughter. For full descriptions of his antics, see Dio (*Epitome* of book 73) and the *Augustan History*'s biography.

By signal contrast, Commodus's father, Marcus Aurelius, frequently expresses his loathing for the games in his *Meditations* (often called 'The Golden Book', supposedly the favourite reading of Bill Clinton, who must have missed the parts about sexual continence). He ostentatiously did his paperwork, ignoring the action – point, though, is, he felt obliged to attend. For much more see the mammoth online article by Donald Robertson.

As befits the first Christian emperor, Constantine is credited with taking steps to abolish the gladiators, but details are obscure and, notably, the games, albeit in an increasingly Christian world, lasted until 1 January 404, when (Theodore, *Ecclesiastical History*, bk5 ch27) a monk named Telemachus (suspicious name? It means 'Ending the Battle') rushed into the arena and tried to separate the combatants. The furious spectators stoned him to death. But, when emperor Honorius heard of this, he proclaimed Telemachus a Martyr and banned the fights. A similar ban was soon imposed on the beast fights. Earlier, in 393, the Olympic Games had been suppressed by Theodosius I as 'too pagan'.

Incidentally, there is not much else to admire about Honorius, except (perhaps) his being the only Roman emperor to keep pet chickens – knew all about fowl play…

Vale, Baldwinius Scribillator, Lecturi Te Damnant – Goodbye, Baldwin the Scribbler, Those About To Read Damn You…

ARCHÆOLOGY A MONTHLY EXCAVATION OF ODDITIES AND ANTIQUITIES

PAUL SIEVEKING digs up some intriguing recent discoveries ranging from Egypt to East Anglia

SCREAMING MUMMY

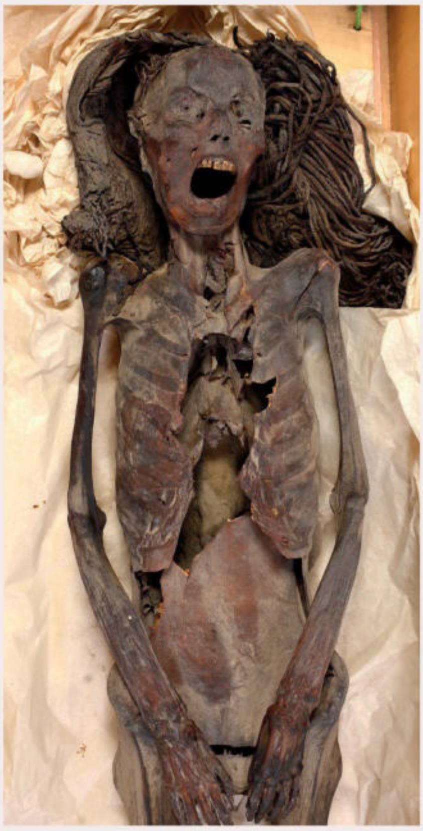
This mummy, discovered in 1935 in Deir-el-Bahari near Luxor in Egypt, has an expression of agony initially blamed on the poor quality of embalming. Some suggest the body experienced a rare immediate form of rigor mortis known as cadaveric spasm shortly after death, around 3,500 years ago, causing the muscles to freeze in the position the woman was in at the moment of death, immortalising her apparent anguish. The mummy was found close to the tomb of Senmut, a well-known architect during the reign of the female pharaoh Hatshepsut, suggesting a kinship tie between the two.

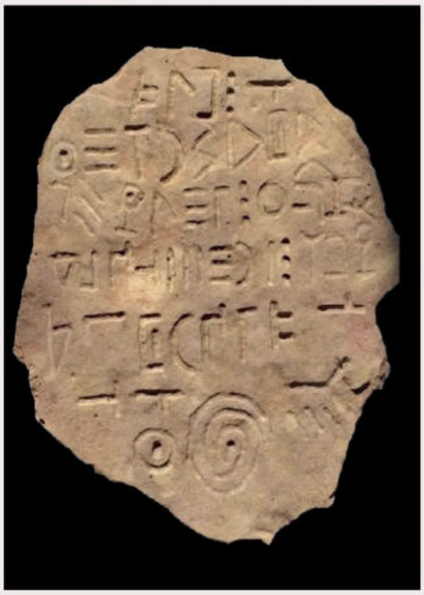
Lying inside a wooden coffin, the Screaming Woman had two gold and silver scarab rings on the third finger of her left hand, and a black wig made from date palm fibres treated with quartz, magnetite and albite crystals. She was 1.55m (about 5ft) tall and died around the age of 48. Scans revealed she had lost and broken many of her teeth and suffered from mild arthritis of the spine. Her brain, lungs, liver, spleen, kidneys and intestine were still present – unlike classic mummification methods where major organs (apart from the heart) are removed.

The findings – using computerised tomography (CT) scanning technology and X-ray diffraction analysis, and published in the journal *Frontiers in Medicine* – showed that she was embalmed with juniper resin and frankincense (costly imports), contradicting the belief that a failure to remove her inner organs implied poor mummification. Cause of death, however, remains a mystery.

While rare, the woman is not the only "screaming" mummy. The scientists have previously studied the corpse of what is thought to be Prince Pentawere, the son of Pharaoh Ramesses III, who was involved in a plot to kill his father. Pentawere's body was barely embalmed, which may indicate that the embalmers neglected to keep his mouth closed likely as a punishment causing him to scream for eternity. The remains of Princess Meritamun, thought to be the sister of King Ahmose, who ruled from about 1550 to 1525 BC, also has such an expression.

The evidence suggests Meritamun died of a sudden and massive heart attack. The widely opened mouth was likely natural post-mortem jaw drop that was maintained due to a post-mortem muscle contraction – rigor mortis – that prevented embalmers from closing her mouth. *Guardian, D.Express, 2 Aug; <i> 3 Aug 2024.*


SALEEM AND EL-MERGHANI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LEFT: The 'screaming mummy' discovered in Luxor in 1935. **BELOW**: A mysterious stone tablet found in Georgia; the inscriptions on it do not match any known writing system.

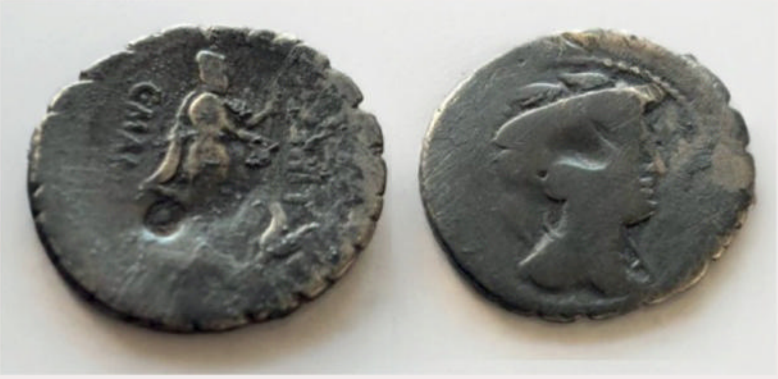
The Screaming Woman had two gold and silver scarab rings on the third finger of her left hand

UNKNOWN LANGUAGE

A mysterious stone tablet containing an unknown ancient language has been discovered in Georgia's Bashplemi Lake. The remarkable find occurred in 2021 when local fishermen spotted the basalt slab buried in lake silt during a particularly dry season. The ancient tablet measures 24.1 x 20.1cm and is made from locally sourced vesicular basalt. It features 60 characters arranged in seven rows, with 39 unique symbols that don't match any known writing system. Whilst experts have been unable to chemically date the artefact, they believe it could originate from the late Bronze or Early Iron Age, potentially around 14,000 years ago.

The tablet's inscriptions reveal a sophisticated level of craftsmanship, created through a meticulous two-step carving process. Ancient artisans first drilled notches to outline each symbol, then used a rounded tool to smooth out the patterns. This technique resulted in a series of distinctive curving shapes, lines and dots. The closest matching symbols can be found in Proto-Kartvelian, an ancient language spoken in the fourth millennium BC that preceded modern Georgian. Similar shapes have also been identified on ancient seals used by officials in pre-Christian Georgia during the early Iron Age. While the symbols don't match any known script exactly, researchers have noted intriguing similarities to various ancient writing systems. Similarities were mostly identified while comparing the tablet symbols with Caucasian scripts (Georgian Mrgvlovani, Albanian, proto-Georgian).

In a paper published in the *Journal of Ancient History and Archæology*, experts highlighted connections to scripts from the Middle East, India, Egypt and Western Iberia. The archæological site, located in the historical region of Dbaniskhevi, has been inhabited since the early Bronze Age. Drone surveys of the area around Bashplemi Lake have revealed circular patterns suggesting burial mounds, alongside geometric shapes that could indicate ancient houses, defensive structures and religious sites. The region shows evidence of long-term settlement, with archæologists discovering stone and obsidian tools used for processing hides. Since the language remains undeciphered, researchers have developed several theories about the tablet's potential purpose. The repeated characters on the stone could represent numbers, suggesting it might be a record of important information. Experts propose the inscription could document military spoils, detail an important construction project, or represent an offering to a deity.



LEFT: A silver denarius found in Cumbria; it was minted 82 years before the Romans arrived in Britain. **BELOW**: The ‘imitation’ Roman coin found by a detectorist in Norfolk.

FRANK GIECCO

The Mansi municipality, where the tablet was discovered, was once home to a thriving civilisation, providing context for such an important historical record. The tablet’s location has sparked interest in its potential connection to ancient Greek mythology. The region where the tablet was found corresponds to the historical land of Colchis, famously featured in the tale of Jason and the Argonauts. Ancient Greek sources mention that the Colchian people possessed knowledge of a mysterious ‘Golden Script’. Byzantine scholar St Eustathius of Thessalonica wrote in the year 1115: “The purpose of the Argonautic expedition was to learn the method of the Golden Script.”

While traces of the Colchian runes have been lost – likely due to their recording on perishable materials like bone or wood – researchers suggest the Bashplemi tablet could be related to this legendary writing system. *Journal of Ancient History and Archaeology, via heritagedaily.com, 3 Dec; gbnews.com, 4 Dec 2024.*

EPHEDRA USE

Researchers have uncovered the earliest evidence of Ephedra use from the charred remains of the plant in a 15,000-year-old human burial site in northeastern Morocco. Ephedra is a genus of shrubs native to arid regions that produces alkaloids like ephedrine and pseudoephedrine, substances used in traditional medicine across many cultures. Archæological evidence of its use during the Palæolithic era is rare due to the fragile nature of plant remains. In a study, “Late Pleistocene exploitation of Ephedra in a funerary context in Morocco,” published in *Scientific Reports*, researchers detail their findings in an excavation of a cave occupied by modern humans for over 100,000 years. Taforalt, also known as Grotte des Pigeons (Cave of Pigeons), served as a living and burial ground for the Iberomaurusians, Late Stone Age hunter-gatherers from 23,000 to 12,600 years ago. The culture is known for its microlithic bladelet industry and elaborate funerary customs.

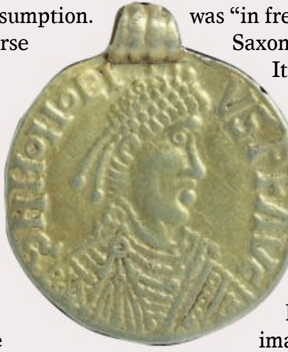
Exceptional preservation conditions allowed for the recovery of well-preserved, carbonized plant remains within the burial pit of an adult male. Alongside unusual artefacts like an ochre-coated mortar and pestle and modified animal remains, the team discovered 23 charred cone bracts of Ephedra. A bract is a modified leaf that forms the flaky, paperlike material you might encounter while taking apart a pinecone, or the woody scales that protect some flower bases. Analysis suggests the charred cone bracts represent residues from processing and consuming the plant’s fleshy cones, valued for nutritional and therapeutic properties. A higher concentration of Ephedra in the burial sediments compared to other cave areas indicates its specific use during funerary activities rather than daily consumption. Considering the potential adverse effects of regular Ephedra use on the central nervous and cardiovascular systems, the researchers suggest it is plausible the plant was reserved for special occasions such as funerary rites or therapeutic purposes. The higher concentrations found in the burial sediments also support the idea of specific use during funerary practices. *phys.org, 6 Nov 2024.*

ROMAN COIN PUZZLE

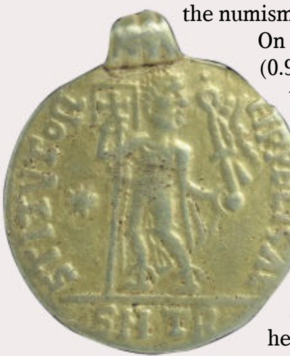
A silver denarius minted in Rome in 82 BC has been discovered during a dig near an ancient bathhouse in Cumbria. On one side the coin depicts Ulysses walking his dog Argos as described in *The Odyssey*, and on the other the head of the god Mercury. The coin is far older than anything else the team found on the site, and was minted about 150 years before the Romans arrived in Carlisle. Punch marks on the coin suggested it had been tested to determine whether it was a fake or not (forgeries would have had a thin plating of silver over a copper core and so if you pushed into it, you’d expose the copper.) “It is probable that this coin travelled to Britain well after it was minted,” said Dr Clare Rowan, who studies ancient coins at Warwick University. *BBC News, 10 July 2024.*

ANGLO-SAXON REPLICA OF ROMAN COIN

A “very unusual” gold pendant made by an early Anglo-Saxon in imitation of a Roman coin was discovered by a detectorist in a field near Attleborough, Norfolk, in January 2023. The replica is a copy of a solidus coin showing the emperor Honorius (AD 393-423) on one side and a figure holding a banner with Christian symbols on the other. The late 5th to early 6th century pendant was created at a time when Anglo-Saxons were pagans.



Dr Adrian Marsden, from the Norfolk Historic Environment Service, said this was an era when the Roman Empire, which had become officially Christian by AD 380, was “in freefall”. “We know the Anglo-Saxons of this period are pagan. It’s slightly ironic, these people are definitely not Christian, yet they are copying a Christian image – the moot point is if they understood the imagery – and they blundered the lettering, so they’re certainly not literate.” The “garbled” lettering around the emperor’s image reads D N HONORIVS P F AVG and was “more-or-less accurate”, the numismatist added.



NORFOLK COUNTY COUNCIL

On the other side of the 23mm (0.9in) long by 20.2mm (0.8in) wide pendant can be seen a figure holding a banner with a cross design. Dr Marsden said such imitations were “very unusual”. “We see Roman gold coins being repurposed as coins, occasionally with very similar suspension loops, but here they’ve made the whole thing from scratch,” he said. Despite the collapse of the empire, the Anglo-Saxons would have come across many impressive Roman buildings, as well as coins and artefacts, and that may be why they want to copy something “so distinctly Roman”. He also suggested the pendant could have been part of a burial, rather than having been lost, indicating it came from the owner’s grave which was ploughed up over the centuries until it finally rose close enough to the surface for the detectorist to find. *BBC News, 20 Oct 2024.*

Attack of the secret space lasers

DAVID HAMBLING doubts that direct-energy weapons were behind the recent California wildfires

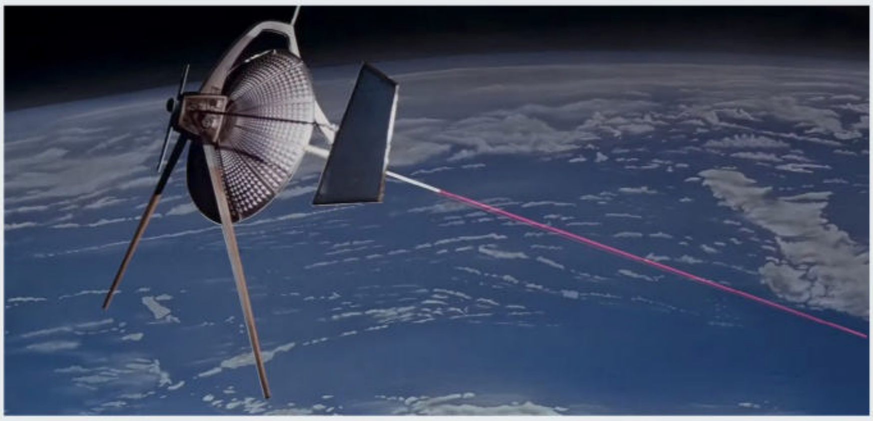
In January 2025, some of the worst wildfires in California's history destroyed 18,000 homes and forced more than 200,000 people to evacuate (see **FT455:23**). On social media, viral posts highlighted apparent evidence the fires were caused by orbiting lasers. Is this simply West Coast lunacy, or is there more going on?

After decades of developmental hell, high-energy laser weapons are now a reality. This success follows a slew of high-profile expensive failures, most notably the 'Star Wars' orbiting anti-missile project of the 1980s. But real, albeit low-powered, weapons have now been fielded. The US Army scored its first combat laser kill, of a small drone, in the Middle East late last year. To some, this makes laser arson plausible. At least two videos on TikTok show beams of green light flashing down from the sky to ignite fires. The website Logically Facts looked into these and found that in one video the 'laser beams' were streaks caused by a dirty lens. The other had been posted previously in 2023 and had been digitally altered. Elsewhere, social media alleged the fingerprints of laser strikes. These were images of intact trees, sometimes still green, standing next to properties which had been completely burned out.

"Again! Why do I see all those trees intact? DEW Direct Energy Weapons is my answer!!!." ran the caption for one such post on Facebook. "This is not just a wildfire, it's a methodical attack," ran another on X/Twitter. "Directed Energy Weapons offer terrifying precision: they can melt metal while sparing trees or selectively target specific materials… of a larger plan to reshape the world under the guise of 'sustainability.'"

These echoed similar claims made during the 2023 fires in Hawaii. Experts had less interesting explanations for the anomaly. "The primary reason is that trees have roots that bring water up to keep the foliage moist," Jon Keeley, a fire scientist with the US Geological Survey, told Reuters. "Homes do not… Moist foliage will not burn until it is heated sufficiently to drive off the moisture. When the winds are moving fast, often it is past the trees before they have dried sufficiently to ignite."

But belief in lasers extends to high places. In 2018 Marjorie Taylor Greene, a Republican in the US House of Representatives, posted on X/Twitter that the wildfires then were caused by "lasers or blue beams of light" seen by witnesses coming down from space. Greene suggested these were likely from satellites operated by the Pacific Gas and Electric Company and the Rothschilds. The supposed goal of this arson campaign was to clear obstacles for a "$77 billion High Speed Rail Project" supported by the then-governor of California. Greene was widely mocked for her 'Jewish Space Lasers' and has not commented on the issue recently. But clearly those blue beams have had an influence. During the recent fires an online request advised: "Be on the lookout for any blue items that survive the fire and take pictures of them. Many of the recent fires had blue items which survived unscathed: cars, umbrellas, tarps, T-shirts, plastic bins."



Republican Marjorie Taylor Greene was widely mocked for her "Jewish Space Lasers"

The idea is that objects which reflect blue light would not be affected by a blue laser. This is at least partially valid, although a weapon which could be defeated by blue paint seems doubtful. Also, blue light is scattered (hence the blue sky), so a blue laser would not propagate far through the atmosphere; laser weapons are invariably infra-red. More seriously, a plastic bin will melt when its surroundings reach 140˚C whether the fire was started by a laser or a match. But, as in any fire, some items will survive, and pictures of intact blue objects would 'confirm' the theory to its supporters.

Scientists have other ideas about why California suffered so many severe fires. The area has experienced a prolonged drought, including the driest nine-month period on record, creating ideal conditions for wildfires to spread. These were combined with strong Santa Ana winds. This is a local 'katabatic' wind, which occurs when a mass of air flows downhill and picks up speed. This is a seasonal California phenomenon, and its effects on wildfires are well known. Strong winds, with gusts of over 100mph (160km/h) were predicted and duly occurred. These fanned the flames and quickly spread burning embers over a wide area. Scientists also pointed to the effects of climate change. The same conditions – more heat, less rain – have led to worse fires in Australia and Europe as well as other parts of the US.

Exactly how each individual fire started in California is still a matter of investigation. Current research focuses on powerline faults, careless hikers, a previous fire which was not fully extinguished, and the possibility of arson. But what about space lasers?

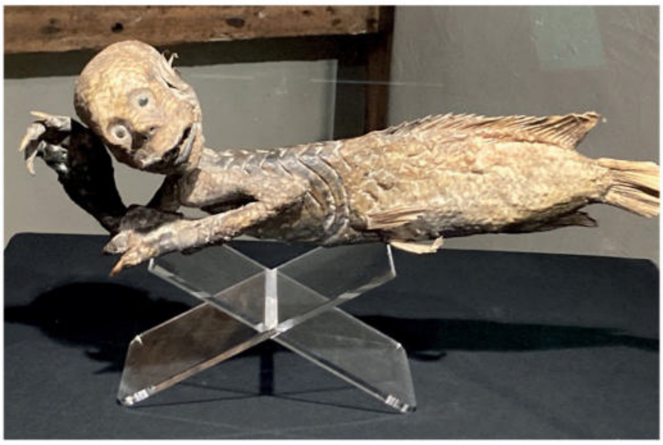
The problem is a big technical issue of atmospheric absorption and scattering. Military lasers have a range of just one or two miles and are ground-based. The 1980s Star Wars satellite lasers would have zapped missiles while they were up in space, away from atmospheric effects. Pushing a high-energy beam all the way down through the atmosphere though dust, haze, cloud and, notably, smoke from wildfires, is far beyond current capabilities. Any Bond villain who wants a satellite laser like Blofeld in the 1971 movie *Diamonds are Forever* (pictured above), will have a long wait.

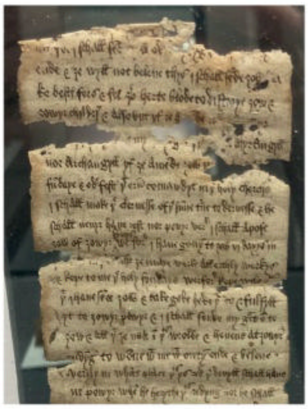
Perhaps the most telling argument is practicality. If a US organisation wanted to start fires in the Californian wilderness, they would have operatives place incendiary devices on timers. That would be infinitely quicker, cheaper and easier to organise, and would not leave the smoking gun of a giant orbiting laser platform which everyone with a telescope can see.

SUPERSTITION: STRANGE WONDERS AND CURIOSITIES

MATT SALUSBURY visits an exhibition of East Anglian curiosities in Bury St Edmunds's Moyse's Hall Museum

PHOTOS: MATT SALUSBURY





LEFT: A 'mermaid' possibly made by artist Juan Cabena. **BELOW:** A 15th century 'Sunday letter' found hidden in a house in Fornham St Martin.

At the time of writing there's still a cornucopia of forteana on show in the suitably grand surroundings of Moyse's Hall Museum, Bury St Edmunds, believed to be one of the oldest civic buildings in England, dating to the 12th century.

"Superstition: Strange Wonders and Curiosities", as the exhibition is titled, includes some fairy loaves – fossil sea-urchins (**FT278:63, 332:42**) – that could be found in abundance in the sandy soils locally and that slightly resemble miniature, round loaves. These were thought to have been baked by the fairies; they were said to bring good luck in Suffolk and to ensure a plentiful supply of real bread. Paradoxically, in the neighbouring county of Norfolk, bringing fairy loaves into your home was thought to invite misfortune.

Also on show, from Moyse's Hall's own collection, are plenty of locally-sourced mummified cats and mummified kittens (**FT363:74-76**) and numerous objects found stuffed up Suffolk chimneys or concealed in gaps in the walls or ceilings of Suffolk's more ancient houses.

Dan Clarke, West Suffolk Heritage Officer based at Moyse's Hall, says they get on average one mummified cat a year found in a Suffolk wall or chimney space donated to them by a member of the public. He also said that compared to any other counties, there's a ridiculously high number of dead animals or animal parts found in the spaces of Suffolk's older houses, from cats to horse's legs.

Concealing old shoes and old clothes – some apparently deliberately damaged – in spaces within East Anglian houses was also said to ensure good luck, and there are plenty of these on display too.

The exhibition includes some fairy loaves – fossil sea urchins

The centrepiece of the exhibition is a scroll recently discovered hidden in a beam in Fornham St Martin, just outside Bury. Folklorist and occasional *FT* contributor Dr Francis Young has analysed the scroll and concluded it's from the 15th century and is a handwritten 'Sunday letter'. This is a tradition going back to late Anglo-Saxon times, involving letters claiming to have been written by Jesus himself. The Sunday letter on show here promises dire punishments to anyone who misses church, including a threat to destroy the reader's family. It also admonishes the reader to "bring no children" into the church that they should regularly attend. It ends with a prayer for "a good death" and by offering protection to those who carry it. It is thought to have once been a protective amulet whose wearer later stuffed it into a beam in the hope that its protection would be extended to the whole house.

There is additionally the skeleton of a huge hound unearthed in a 2014 archæological dig at Leiston Abbey near the Suffolk coast, deep in Black Shuck country. While the find caused some excitement at the time, dental evidence suggests it was a well-loved, Great Dane-sized farm dog and family pet that died at a ripe old age sometime around 1700.

Then there's a horrific 'genuine fake' mermaid – a gaff or Jenny Haniver thought to have been made by artist Juan Cabena using bits of apes, monkeys, fish and crocodiles. And there are "witch bottles" with analysis of their contents.

There are memorabilia from the Highgate Vampire affair of the early 1970s, too, including two contemporary vampire hunting kits, at least one of them put together by the self-styled North London Vampire Group. This one included contemporary London Transport 2p bus tickets and a handy leaflet on "Bus changes in the Highgate Area – New-type Buses on Routes 125 and 244."

Another recent acquisition on show, of which Moyse's Hall is particularly proud, is a rare copy of *A Tryal of Witches*, a detailed contemporary account of the trial of the Lowestoft Witches, Rose Cullender and Amy Duny, before the assizes at Bury in 1688. It was one of the last high-profile witch trials in England (**FT367:40-44**).

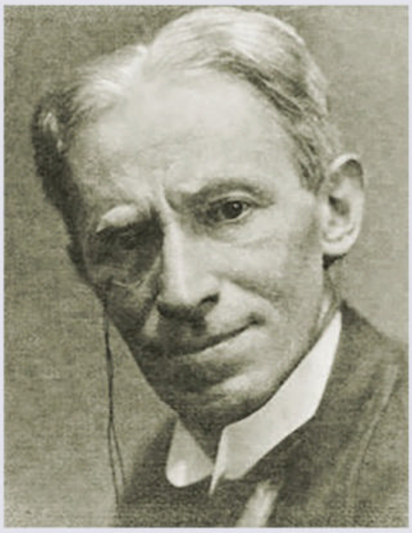
The exhibition coincides with the local production of a new play, also called *A Tryal of Witches*. This is a dramatisation of another, earlier, witch trial in Bury of 1645 in which 18 defendants, nearly all women, were convicted and hanged on evidence supplied by self-styled "Witchfinder General" Matthew Hopkins (**FT198:30-36, 367:32-39**). The *Tryal of Witches* play runs at Bury's Theatre Royal – Britain's only surviving Regency period theatre – from 7 to 22 March.

While 'Superstition' has a short run – it finishes on 6 April – it's a "pilot exhibition". If you're not able to make it, Moyse's Hall promises a bigger follow-up exhibition of a longer duration, on some of the same themes, to open on 31 October 2026 – yes, Hallowe'en. Dan Clarke can't give much away yet, but he does tell me that it will have a focus on the East of England "cunning men" (magic-users, healers, horse whisperers) and other practitioners of magic, avoiding use of the "W" word, which – particularly when applied to women – is viewed as problematic these days.

SUPERSTITION: STRANGE WONDERS AND CURIOSITIES, Moyse's Hall Museum, Cornhill, Bury St Edmunds, from 10am daily, last admission 3.30 (3pm Sunday), adults £5, ends 6 April. www.moyseshall.org

Phantom footsteps in Ireland

ALAN MURDIE enjoys spooky stories of fairy-haunted Ireland from two very different sources



RICHARD CAVE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE LEFT: Professor Ronald Hutton. **ABOVE RIGHT**: Ghost hunter and prolific author Elliott O'Donnell.

At first blush Professor Ronald Hutton and long-gone ghost hunter Elliott O'Donnell (1873-1965) who died 60 years ago this April would appear to have little in common. One is a distinguished living historian renowned for his scholarly volumes on ancient and modern paganism, while the other is a long deceased and largely forgotten ghost chaser, notorious as a peddler of incredible spooky yarns churned out in popular books from the Edwardian era to the 1950s.

Yet they do share one thing: both report as young men undergoing unnerving personal experiences of hearing mysterious footsteps on isolated Irish roads reputedly haunted by fairies.

Let's begin with O'Donnell's encounter. This occurred around 1892, as regaled in his book *Twenty Years' Experience as a Ghost Hunter* (1917). After a series of failed starts in life O'Donnell had decided to take up ghost hunting "as a profession" and earn a living from writing. Following an unpleasant encounter with an entity in the bedroom of a house off Waterloo Road, Dublin (which may have been an incident of sleep paralysis), he decided to head into rural Ireland, recording: "I set out one day to investigate a case of haunting by fairies which was alleged to take place nightly at the junction of four crossroads on the southern slope of the Wicklow mountains."

"I found a spot that seemed to correspond with the description of the scene of the haunting given me by my informant and kept a vigil there for two consecutive nights without experiencing any of the anticipated results."

> "I awoke with violent palpitations of the heart to find the room bathed with moonlight..."

Nothing unusual for a ghost hunter one might think, but determined on venturing a third attempt he went back again. Unfortunately, en route, he began feeling tired and unwell and decided to try and find lodging at a remote cottage off the main road about half a mile distant, reached along a narrow lane. The cottage was tenanted by a couple named Mullins who were amenable to accommodating him in a spare room facing the front of the property. Retiring early to a comfortable bed, O'Donnell was soon sleeping soundly.

He continues: "I awoke with violent palpitations of the heart to find the room bathed with moonlight; and, as all was absolutely silent, I concluded it must be far on into the night."

One can imagine the enveloping silence of nights in such rural places in those days and still occasionally found in parts of the British Isles today.

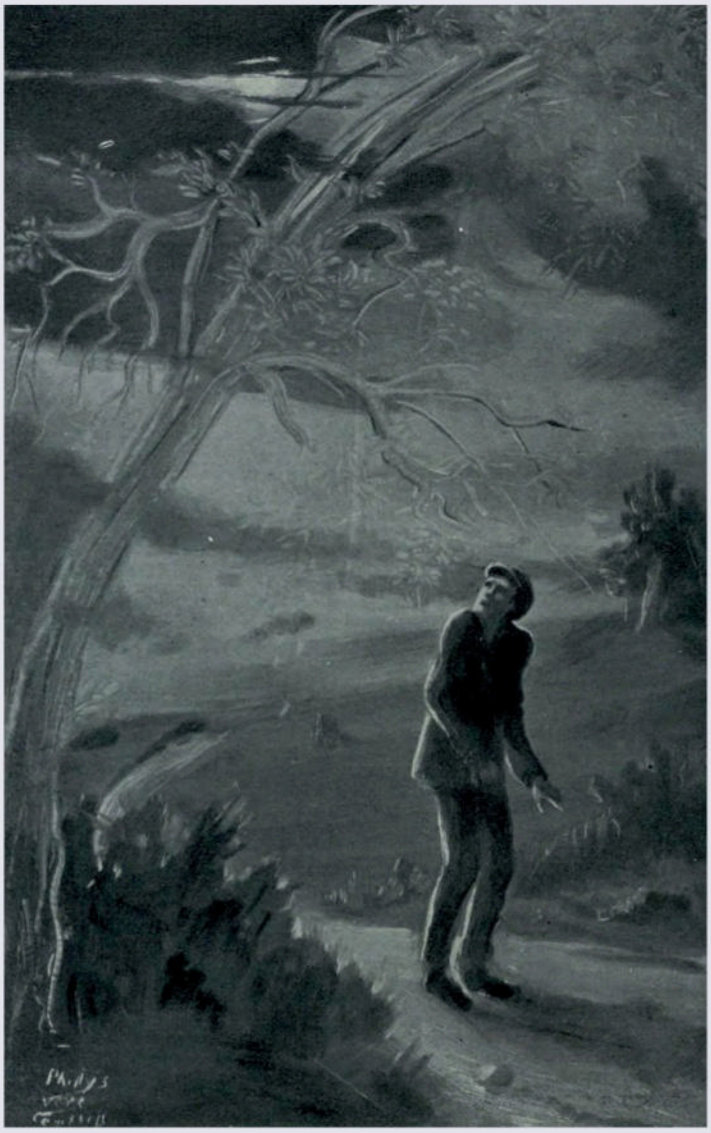
"Suddenly I heard footsteps – footsteps in the distance, running at a well-regulated pace. They rang out sharp and clear in the still air and gradually became more and more distinct. I was wondering who the person could be, out at such an hour, when a dog, apparently in the yard at the back of the house, set up the most unearthly howling."

The noise also awoke the Mullinses and O'Donnell heard them conversing. He overheard Mrs Mullins insisting the extraordinary sounds coming from their dog was a warning of a supernatural presence.

Meanwhile, "The steps were very near now. I listened intently. The runner, I thought, must be wearing very extraordinary boots, for every step, so it seemed to me, was accompanied by a peculiar and almost metallic click."

Mrs Mullins grew ever more agitated as the steps approached the lane, wailing to her husband "...they're in the lane – they're coming here! Get up at once; go and bolt the front door. The thing's evil – evil, I'm sure, and it's someone of us here it's after."

As the steps closed in Mr Mullins stumbled hastily down the stairs, bolted the doors and closed the wooden shutters. O'Donnell writes: "A moment



LEFT: An illustration from Elliott O'Donnell's *Twenty Years' Experience as a Ghost Hunter* (1917).

later, and I heard the steps come right up to the door. There was a momentary pause, then a series of terrific knocks!"

At this, Mrs Mullins launched into prayers for protection, urging her husband to make the sign of the Cross and begging the Virgin Mary for deliverance.

"[W]hether it was the effect of her prayers or not, the knocking gradually diminished in violence and then ceased altogether," says O'Donnell, and silence reigned once more. Sheepishly, he looked out from the upstairs window and saw an empty landscape bathed in moonlight, "every stick and stone being plainly visible" yet nothing to be seen to account for the sounds.

O'Donnell returned to bed and resumed his sleep. The next morning, after breakfast, he discussed the uncanny experience with Mrs Mullins and revealed his own recent confrontation with a ghost at the house in Dublin. Mrs Mullins expressed her belief that the spirit had attached itself to him and that the same ghost lay behind their terrifying visitation the previous night. Consequently, she and her husband wanted him to leave. In fact, O'Donnell was already set on departing since "the neighbourhood had lost all its charms for me" and he admitted nothing would have induced him to remain longer.

Later moving to England, O'Donnell encountered further instances of ghostly footsteps following him after conducting ghost vigils on Hounslow Heath. They immediately reminded him of his harrowing Irish experiences, a thought plunging him into "an agony of fear, lest the steps should stop at the house and there should be a repetition of the terrible knocking at the door". *Twenty Years' Experience as a Ghost Hunter* ends with him tremulously anticipating a repetition of these incidents.

This florid style typifies the stories packing his astonishing works, so vastly different from ponderous accounts in psychical research and the relatively mild descriptions of most modern ghost experiences. His tales far exceed the measured and artfully constructed fictions of his near-contemporary and doyen of the ghost story as entertainment, MR James (1862-1936; see **FT392:30-37**). Of him James commented, "Mr Elliott O'Donnell's multitudinous volumes I do not know whether to class as narratives of fact or exercises in fiction. I hope they may be of the latter sort, for life in a world managed by his gods and infested by his demons seems a risky business."

A reviewer for *Psychic News* of O'Donnell's posthumous volume, *A Casebook of Ghosts* (1969), commented more starkly, "The collection contains some of the most horrifying blood-curdling accounts I have ever read" (8 Nov 1969).

Quite so. O'Donnell doesn't just seek to chill your blood with his stories, he wants every hair bristling, your spine flapping like a flagpole in a gale and your eyes popping out on stalks, reaching the point that consuming too many in one sitting can leave sensitive children and even some adults struggling to conduct themselves with dignity and restraint.

Whereas in James's classic stories usually only nosey academics, dabblers and wrongdoers are in danger, with O'Donnell the ghosts are frequently terroristic and wholly indiscriminate in their assaults. Page after page recounts cases of dreadful entities persecuting innocent men, women and children with impunity, with victims even driven to madness, murder or premature death. Seldom do the rites of the Church or the attentions of mediums afford relief. Frequently escape is only achievable by fleeing the premises and the house being torn down afterwards.

The most plausible and parsimonious explanation is ascribing them all to O'Donnell simply making everything up. However, over the years, observing Charles Fort's dictum that no one is a complete imposter, I have come to view O'Donnell as being more of psychological than psychical interest. Notably, in another book, *Byways of Ghost-land* (1911), he writes of other ghostly impressions sustained "passing after nightfall, through tree-girt glen, forest, or avenue" or "moon-kissed spaces," claiming that "pacing alongside me, I have oft-times heard footsteps, light and heavy, though I have seen nothing".

Which brings us to another haunted road in rural Ireland and the experience of Professor Hutton, related in an infinitely less sensationalist manner for the 'Scarlett of the Fae' podcast in 2023. (www.scarlettofthefae.com/ep-58-professor-ronald-huttons-encounter-with-a-leannan-sidhe, 7 May 2023).

In July 1985 he was visiting a southern

TRISH PUNCH / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: The path behind the sand dunes to Derrynane on the Ring of Kerry in Ireland.

stretch of the Ring of Kerry with a tour group. Since the other members of the group retired early, he decided to take a walk on the coastal road to the village of Derrynane which possessed a pub. He joked with the young woman hotel receptionist about folkloric stories of a dangerous female fairy being, a lady known in Irish mythology as the *Leannan Sidhe*, and that he might meet her. The receptionist stated, "Tonight she will be walking" and adding (presumably in jest) that if he did run into her, he might not return!

Feeling upbeat, Professor Hutton set off for the inn. It was still daylight, though a brooding mist gathered upon the horizon. On arriving at the pub, he enjoyed a most convivial evening providing all he could have wished for, including a fine local stout. After midnight it was time to return, and he emerged in a buoyant and relaxed mood to be faced with the trek back through total darkness. In the interim a dense fog had descended, reducing visibility to zero. He realised he now confronted a rather unpleasant walk trying to abide by the tortuous road, fully conscious of various hazards lurking on either side if he deviated from the correct path. Stepping out, he was struck by the intense stillness of the location, his own footsteps the only sound audible.

Gingerly pacing his way back, stories of the *Leannan Sidhe* came to mind and he began to feel mildly uncomfortable. Nonetheless, he stoically continued for some distance until suddenly becoming aware of another set of footsteps, as if he was being tailed by someone. The steps seemed to follow a second or so after his own steps, both stopping and starting with him. Thinking how his situation paralleled scenes in horror films when a hapless heroine is pursued through mist and wondering if some prankster, or perhaps even a potential psychopath, was abroad, he elected not to draw further attention to himself or his precise location. Resisting all temptation to call out, he pressed on, with the footsteps seemingly following until, after about a mile and half, he saw the welcoming gleam of his hotel lights. Much relieved on arriving back safely, he slept well. The next day the tour resumed, and he suffered no ill-effects from his otherworldly adventure.

Only years afterwards, on returning to Irish Fairylore, did Professor Hutton garner an additional detail of the terrible aspect of the *Leannan Sidhe* and her habit of accosting young men walking alone after nightfall. Apparently, if they ignore her all will be well, but if they speak with her, it is certain death.

This Jamesian touch nicely rounds off this real-life story of a scholar seemingly pursued by a presence; Professor Hutton leaves his audience pondering a choice of three possible explanations.

The simplest is that he heard the footsteps of another living person, perhaps a taciturn, morose or insomniac farmer out late checking his beasts but disdaining to speak.

A second is that the footsteps were entirely hallucinatory, arising from the combination of a rural inn, a lonely road, disorientation within suddenly sinister and forbidding surroundings and a spooky story working to stimulate his unconscious mind. His experience is reminiscent of one which befell another academic, Professor J Norman Collie, who heard crunching footfalls on the slopes of Ben MacDhui in the Cairngorms in 1891, attributed to the 'Big Grey Man' and perhaps ascribable to being in a lonely environment – the 'Third Man' hallucinatory phenomenon recounted by explorers and climbers. (see Ghostwatch, **FT394:18-22**). Professor Hutton doubts this; had he been reading O'Donnell, perhaps – but it had transpired after a merry evening at a genuine Irish local.

The third and most awesome explanation is that a spectral presence was traversing the same coastal road that night. *I Walked With A Zombie* was a 1943 horror film; did Professor Hutton walk with the *Leannan Sidhe* or another entity?

It's ultimately not possible to say. But I can guess what Elliot O'Donnell would have thought...

THE CONSPIRASPHERE

It's 2025 and we're still alive! But don't celebrate too soon, says **NOEL ROONEY**, as he contemplates the prophecies of the Deagel Corporation and the growth of global gloom.

DEAGEL DOOM

Most readers will remember the great Mayan calendar flap of 2012. As the year, and the winter solstice, approached, we were treated to an avalanche of learned and not so learned prophecy, some of it laden with doom and some of it embrocated with redemptive (and decidedly woo woo) joy. Needless to say, none of it bothered the calendar, which sailed on into the galactic centre regardless (see **FT285:33-47, 300:33-43**).

Something similar is troubling the Conspirasphere now, not that it's an occasion for making woo-woo whoopee. To understand the worried whispers, you have to travel back to 2014, and the first appearance of a report that hangs like a spectre over the year 2025. The Deagel report, a projection of world population, particularly in European countries, offered a picture that was anything but redemptive.

The report claimed that by 2025, the population of the USA would decrease by nearly 70 per cent; that of the UK by a similar amount. Other countries were to be depopulated too, but none as drastically as these two. There was no direct indication in the report of the reasons for this dramatic collapse. Nonetheless it set alarm bells ringing. And then it all went quiet.

Until 2019/2020, that is, when an updated report appeared giving the same gloomy forecast. By then, 2025 was a little closer on the horizon, and the Covid thing was happening; the strange projection began to make sense to some. In 2021, however, the report was removed from Deagel's website; if anything, this made the alarm bells ring louder (see **FT435:22**).

Even mundane evidence is ominous fuel for the engine of fate

The Deagel Corporation is, most of the time, a defence intelligence contractor, working for a range of three-letter agencies in the US. It analyses weapon systems and new military technology. It also carries a country-by-country guide indicating population, wealth and power. Quite why these military mavens decided to add prophecies of doom to their repertoire is unclear; it is equally unclear why they decided to abandon the project just as their projections were getting to the pointy end.

In 2021, Deagel updated its disclaimer notice. This got a few in the C-sphere excited in various ways, but what struck me was that it now read like a conspiracist's manifesto:

"The Great Reset; like the climate change, extinction rebellion, planetary crisis, green revolution, shale oil (…) hoaxes promoted by the system; is another attempt to slow down dramatically the consumption of natural resources and therefore extend the lifetime of the current system. It can be effective for awhile [sic] but finally won't address the bottom-line problem and will only delay the inevitable. The core ruling elites hope to stay in power which is in effect the only thing that really worries them" (punctuation as per original).

It goes on in the same vein for most of a page. One line that was pounced on by many observers was the claim that lockdown would kill more people than Covid would. Was this a case of TPTB owning up to the grand scheme, in advance? Curiously, most commentators remained hostile to Deagel even as they noted its clear deviation from the official line.

And now the time, as scripture has it, is at hand. Since we have failed to disappear in very large numbers thus far, one might anticipate a lively year; and many in the C-sphere have done just that. Evidence is all around us. Pessimistic enthusiasm infuses every analysis.

The roads to drastic depopulation, in this worldview, are many; but are they so different from the picture of panic we receive via the news media? Consider the prime candidates for completing Deagel's dismal destiny.

Covid and the vaccine feature prominently. Concerns over the safety and efficacy of the vaccine are not limited to the Conspirasphere, but the conspiracist grand narrative – of Bill Gates the wicked eugenicist, of Fauci the serial liar, of Big Pharma killing for profit – give them the prophetic gravitas of inevitability. Timing is key; when the vaccines first rolled out, doomsayers claimed all recipients would be dead in five years. And our five years are up, right on Deagel schedule.

Remember those (clearly fake) Chinese videos of folks dropping dead in the street? They carry a very different resonance now. And if the vaccines don't get you, the next big pandemic will. The pictures will look the same.

The Trump-Zelenskyy spat added impetus to the juggernaut. The threat of nuclear war has become a staple of speculation on Ukraine; conspiracists didn't invent it, but they have taken it to its logical limits, where legacy journos fear to tread. Add the increasingly divisive conflict in Gaza, and its violent echoes in Syria, and the prospect of world war looks a good bet, a Deagel dark horse at least.

And then there's AI, inevitably. When the very people developing and promoting the technology tell us the story – that sometime next Thursday the machines will wake up and be wise; and then they will eat us all – one can hardly blame others for riffing on the same theme. Even the mundane evidence – that servers now outnumber people and are using an exponentially increasing amount of our electricity; that a fully integrated IT network is vulnerable to deadly global outages – is ominous fuel for the engine of fate.

Well, one might think, perhaps the Deagel furore is less like the Mayan prophecy and more like a turbo-charged version of Y2K. After all, it is 2025 and we're still alive. In which case we can all relax and let the conspiracists do the worrying for us. Unless, of course, Gas Deagel and his fellow weapon enthusiasts were actually onto something, in which case all bets are off, or possibly back on again.

https://seemorerocks.substack.com/p/is-the-deagel-reports-2025-depopulation

https://talknet.substack.com/p/analysis-deagels-population-collapse

https://web.archive.org/web/20170606040640/http://www.pizzagate.wiki/Deagel

STRANGE CONTINENT

ULRICH MAGIN rounds up Europe's latest oddities, from puzzling sky bangs to Catalonian ghosts

STARFISH IN A STORM

Strong winds washed ashore "several thousand" starfish –mostly just a few centimetres in diameter – on the sandy western beaches of the island of Sylt, in the German North Sea. The mass death appears to have been caused by the storms of the preceding days. According to information from the Wadden Sea National Park, the mostly one-year-old starfish are torn away en masse from the subsoil – such as mussel beds – when the sea is heavily disturbed by storms. They cannot hold on to sandy ground and end up on the beach. This phenomenon repeats itself regularly and is said to be completely normal. *welt.de, 7 Jan 2025.*

ABOVE: Dead starfish lie on the beach between the villages of Kampen and List on the island of Sylt in January 2025.

DPA PICTURE ALLIANCE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

WANDERING SQUID

At the cliffs near Hohwacht Stakendorf on the German Baltic coast, Thomas Freiberg, a palæontologist, announced on social networks that a dead squid had washed ashore on the beach. The finder was a woman who had come across the animal in December 2024. "The animal was in good shape and cannot have been there longer than a night," Freiberg told the press. The squid was about 20cm (8.6in) long and was identified as the species *Illex coindetii*, rarely found in these waters some 100 years ago, but since noted in some numbers. Squid are not generally found in the Baltic, which has a low salinity, but *Illex coindetii* is said to be very flexible and adaptable to different environments. *welt.de, 4 Jan 2025.*

STAR ROT & SKY QUAKES

The German UFO study group GEP received an eyewitness report on 10 December 2024 from someone reporting an event that had happened some 25 years ago, between 1997 and 1999. The man was hiking in the Austrian Alps with his brother and his father when they came upon "an area of around 200-400m^2 that was completely covered with chunks of a jelly-like, transparent mass." Such jelly meteors were a favourite of Charles Fort, and it is good to see they are not yet banished to old newspaper files, but still happen today.

During the siege, the attackers threw a body into the well

I missed an ice fall that was reported back in July 2024. On 18 July, two large chunks of ice crashed onto the lawn of the Höhle family of Delbrück, near Paderborn, Germany. The witnesses watched in shock as the two cryometeors hit the ground only a few feet from where they were standing. "First we heard the sound of a drone," then the frosty blocks came down. They reported their find to officials, who didn't react or preserve bits of the ice. *westfalen-blatt.de, 18 July 2024.*

Sky bangs were another of Fort's favourite phenomena. On the evening of 7 January 2025, many people in Bonn, Germany, felt a powerful earthquake and heard a loud explosion in the sky. Some thought something had exploded; others remembered that New Year, when Germans send up fireworks, was only a few days past. The bang, however, was strong enough to rattle windows and shake the ground. Police went to the Lannesdorf quarter where most of the witness accounts originated. "However, on site our officers were unable to determine a cause," said Bonn police spokesman Simon Rott.

Other bangs, with accompanying shaking of buildings and ground, were reported from Castell to the east of the first site. Previously, there had been a bang at Bonn-Auerberg. One witness wrote on reddit.com: "Yesterday evening (2 Jan 2025) there was an extremely loud bang in Auerberg around 11pm. The whole house shook, the furniture moved and I felt the vibrations strongly in my feet. I have already experienced earthquakes and found the shaking to be very similar. The only thing that irritated me was the extremely loud bang. Afterwards I noticed that almost all of the people of Auerberg looked out the window or even left the house. Did anyone see what it was?" Officials never found an explanation for the explosion. A minor earthquake occurred on 17 January with an epicentre close to Bonn, but whether these events were in any way connected was uncertain. On 27 January, I asked Bonn police whether this was still the case. Simon Rott answered, "The police investigation by my colleagues had no concrete results to determine the cause and the origin of the loud noises. We decided against further investigations due to a lack of potential approaches." So the sky explosions remain unexplained. *ga.de, 9 Jan 2025.*

SEND IN THE DRONES

There has been a plague of drones across US and UK, (**FT454:14-15**) and in Europe, we have had the same problem. Obviously, as the number of privately owned drones increases immensely, hobby "pilots" entering restricted air space, both intentionally and unintentionally, will be behind many of the sightings; others are certainly spy drones, while other sightings might be mistaken identifications of stars and planes.

In Europe, there was much talk about drones around military installations since Putin's brutal attack on Ukraine began. Back in March 2022, Russian drones crashed in Croatia and Romania. In August 2024, they violated Poland's air space; early in September 2024, Russian drones were registered in Romania and Latvia, and in November in Moldova. *aa.com.tr, 27 Aug, 10 Sept; pravda.com.ua, 17 Nov 2024.*

It is generally assumed that the drones which are now pestering the continent are remotely flown by Russians. The first stories I became aware of were at Cologne-Bonn airport, a hybrid civilian-military site which has suffered at least three major sabotage acts by unknown agents within the last year. In January 2024, German Air Traffic Control told the press that in 2022 there were five incidents, and in 2023, a further eight incidents involving drones at the airport. From January to July 2024, there were a further seven incidents, and on several occasions all air traffic had been stopped due to the danger posed to aircraft taking off or landing. Over the same period, Frankfurt Airport suffered 10 intrusions, and Düsseldorf five. On 25 August, "a swarm of eight large drones" flew over Cologne Airport, and air traffic had to be stopped. They were two to three metres (7 to 20ft) long and were driven by a propeller at the front. "The swarm was making a lot of noise. The drones looked like dark grey flying soapboxes," one eye-witness who also took photos told the German tabloid *BILD*. No pilot could be traced. There had been an act of sabotage at the NATO base at Geilenkirchen shortly before. On 3 and 4 December, drones were observed over the US-American air base at Ramstein, Germany, and over several other sensitive sites such as the factory of the defence company Rheinmetall and the BASF chemical plant in Germany.

In Denmark, late on 3 January 2025, an eyewitness observed up to 20 large drones at the leisure boat harbour at Køge on the island of Seeland. A police patrol then reported four drones late on the following day; this time they disappeared over the sea at high speed. The Danish secret service PET was informed of the incident. *radioerft.de, 13 Jan; radiobonn.de, 10 July; aero.de, BILD, 29 Aug; Der Spiegel, 14 Dec 2024; morgenpost.de, 5 Jan 2025.*

GHOSTS IN CATALONIA

What sounds like a fortean hotspot was discussed by Barcelona's leading newspaper *La Vanguardia* on 15 November 2024, although it is not clear if the article was prompted by recent events.

The abandoned town of Jafre, or Jafre del Garraf, is about half an hour's drive from the capital of Catalonia on the plateau of a hill. Here, a rich family from Austria once settled at a farm in El Maset de Dalt y de Baix, now a ruin. The family consisted of father, mother, and their three children, who all suffered from a rare skin disease. The parents strictly controlled their kids, who were not allowed to leave the house and gardens. The mother died when she gave birth to a fourth child, a girl named Melinda. When the oldest of the children died, the father became a madman, haunted by the fear that his youngest daughter might also become ill. His antics were so strange that all the servants and gardeners left, and Melinda became so afraid of her father that fleeing from him one day she fell into a well and drowned. Such tragic histories attract legends (if they are not themselves legends), and have "fuelled several horror stories that have been told from generation to generation for years. Some say that from time to time Melinda's ghost appears to hikers in the forests of the Garraf massif and shows them the way to help them escape from her mad father." There are those who say that "Melinda's soul has never rested peacefully and appears in the curves of the Garraf, in the middle of the C-31 highway." The paper adds that today people hold séances in the lost village to record Electronic Voice Phenomena and organise skywatches for UFOs.

100 YEARS AGO

On 3 June 1925, the Spanish newspaper *ABC* reported a "strange geological phenomenon". "In the Rodez region, canton of Sainte-Afrique, near Beziers, a strange geological phenomenon has been recorded. The earth has begun to heat up so much that it burns the soles of the shoes of those who risk passing through that area. Several geologists have travelled to the site of the phenomenon to study it. Until now, only the presence of nauseating vapours and a kind of black oil, which evaporates as soon as it comes into contact with air, has been confirmed."

Béziers is a town in southern France. I struggled to confirm the report, but found a further note in the Austrian *Arbeiter Zeitung* from 30 Aug 1925: "As reported by the *New York Herald* from Beziers, important petroleum deposits have been discovered in the department of Herault, which deliver 50 tons in 13 hours."

I asked Michel Raynal who comes from this area of France, and he sent me information that sheds light on these false claims. The phenomenon was known locally as "the volcano of Tournemire" and was investigated at the time by Abbot Teissier who wrote: "The new examination that I made of the phenomenon reported by you led me to the conclusion that the hot gases observed come from the combustion of the debris of the pyrite and carbonaceous rock, fallen and accumulated on the right bank of the ravine. The start of the reaction was determined at a point where particularly favourable conditions of temperature, humidity, air circulation and concentration of pyritic and carbonaceous material were met. It then spread to the entire mass, as can be seen by digging holes which, at a very short distance from the surface, show materials completely stripped of any charcoal trace. This phenomenon is common in coal mine spoil, which, once combustion begins, burns completely even in its very lightly carbon-containing parts. You perhaps had the opportunity to observe this fact at Firmi, where you were recently. I have not seen anything that allows me to connect the manifestation that concerns us to a geological phenomenon and, as far as I am concerned, I stick to this interpretation. It should not be admitted lightly and it is understandable that people were initially inclined to attribute it to another cause, given that the rock seems not very flammable. Exceptionally favourable conditions were required to determine combustion."

A year later, near Saint-Rome-de-Cernon, Nouzet, another search for oil followed after it was noticed that "from a small spring arising in a meadow along the side of the road, slightly oily water gushed out." Journal de l'Aveyron, 16 May 1926. Again, hopes were disappointed. *Journal de l'Aveyron, 28 June 1925, 16 May 1926.*

ANIMALS BEHAVING BADLY

More criminal critters, including a bear in a supermarket and a weasel shoe thief

ABOVE LEFT: Police officers wearing protective gear and carrying shields enter a supermarket to capture a bear in Akita City, Japan, last December. ABOVE RIGHT: The Japanese kindergarten shoe thief caught in the act.

ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

BEAR SHELVES

On Saturday 30 November 2024 a 47-year-old supermarket employee in Akita, Japan, was working on the delicatessen section while preparing to open the store at 6.20am, when he was attacked by a bear, which knocked him to the ground and left him with head and facial injuries. A colleague helped him to a storage area before calling police, who took the man to hospital, where his injuries were found not to be serious. The bear, however, remained inside the supermarket.

The store manager attempted to assess the situation by peering in through the shop windows, and could see that the animal had ransacked the meat department, broken shelves around the store and shattered the vases in the flower section. Bloodstains, believed to be either from the bear or the meat he'd scoffed, could be seen as well, but it was not clear where the bear had gone.

On Sunday, police sent a drone into the store to see if the animal remained on the shop floor, but could not locate him, so they assumed that he was holed up in the back of the store and sealed the doors that led from the shop floor to the back rooms, setting box traps baited with honey, apples and bread at two of them.

By Monday evening, the bear had triggered one of the traps and was sedated by police, who said they planned to release the animal at a location away from human habitation. It was, though, later reported that the bear had been euthanised after capture. *japantimes.co.jp, 2 Dec 2024.*

POWER MONKEY

A massive power outage took much of Sri Lanka off grid on 9 February, leaving millions of people without electricity and air conditioning in temperatures of over 30C (86F); it also shut down critical infrastructure such as hospitals and water purification plants for most of the day. After an investigation into the cause of the outage, Sri Lanka's energy minister, Kumara Jayakody, made a statement saying: "A monkey came into contact with our grid transformer, causing an imbalance in the power system."

As in many other parts of the world, monkeys have become an increasing problem in Sri Lanka, as while human expansion destroys their natural habitat, they thrive in an urban environment, scavenging and stealing food, and populations boom, bringing them into conflict with human communities and infrastructure. Most of the country got power back within 24 hours, but there was no news on the fate of the monkey. *theguardian.com, 10 Feb 2025.*

CAFFEINE KONG?

A member of staff at a Starbucks branch in Mobile, Alabama, had a nasty surprise when she opened the drive-through window to take a customer's order and a monkey leapt out of the car and attacked her. The woman she was serving had two monkeys loose in her car and, the staff member said: "They pulled up to the window and as soon as she rolled down her window, one monkey just jumped out and up to my hand and started [gnawing] on my hand." The monkey then ran up her arm and jumped on her head. "It bit my ear," she added. "I don't remember this, but one of my coworkers took it off my head and threw it out the window."

Police feared the footwear was being stolen by a shoe fetishist

The woman then drove off with the monkeys, while the staffer was sent to hospital for rabies tests and shots, as well as stitches to the wound on her ear. She was later contacted by someone from the Starbucks corporate claims department. "He was like, 'Seriously? I want to make sure I'm reading this right'," she said. "He said he looked at my location and said he wouldn't expect anything like this."

City authorities caught up with the monkey owner and fined her $25 for each monkey for not securing her pets, while Starbucks officially banned the monkeys from entering any Starbucks building in the future. *notthebee.com, 22 Jan 2025.*

WEASELS RIPPED MY PLIMSOLE

Frustrated by their inability to catch whoever was repeatedly stealing children's shoes, a kindergarten in southwestern Japan called in the police, who set up a security camera to nail the culprit. They successfully caught the shoe thief in action, but it turned out not to be human; it was a weasel, caught on camera making off with a small indoor slip-on shoe from its cubbyhole near the kindergarten entrance. "It's great it turned out not to be a human being," said Deputy Police Chief Hiroaki Inada, who had feared the footwear was being stolen by a shoe fetishist.

On his initial visit, the weasel made off with 15 shoes and scattered others around the kindergarten. Six more were taken on another day, and a single shoe a few days later, which is when the animal was caught on camera. The shoes have not been found and the weasel hasn't been caught, but his pilfering has been brought to an end by netting installed over the cubbyholes. *canoe.com, 23 Nov 2024.*

SNAILIEN INVASION

Attempts to publicise proposals made by the Parish Council in Marden, Herefordshire, by pinning them on a board in the village were thwarted when snails ate the notices. The Council have now undertaken to laminate all future announcements to frustrate the ravening molluscs. Snails are partial to paper because it contains cellulose fibres and calcium and sometimes cause problems by eating the mail in letterboxes. *Hereford Times, 19 Sept 2024.*

THE SAVAGE SEAS

Man swallowed by a humpback whale, woman chomped while snapping a shark and mermaid attacked by a Chinese sturgeon

ABOVE LEFT: Adrián Simancas after being slurped and spat out by a whale. **ABOVE RIGHT**: Onlookers try to aid a Canadian tourist attacked by a shark. **BELOW**: Mariia Zelenina shows off her bruises received after being ambushed by a sturgeon.

ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

MARIIA ZELININA / FACEBBOK

SLURPED

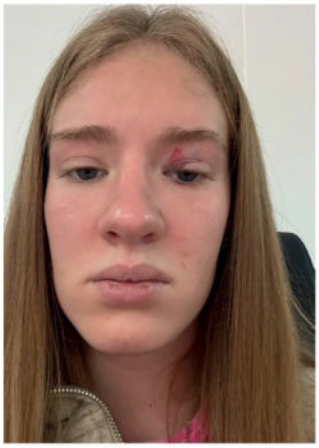
Adrián Simancas went kayaking with his father, Dell, near Bahía El Águila in the Strait of Magellan off Chile, expecting peace and encounters with the abundant local wildlife. However, he had a rather closer encounter than he had bargained for. Among the creatures the Strait is famed for are its humpback whales, and as Simancas kayaked through the chilly waters, which can be as cold as 39F (4C) in the winter, a whale rose up under his boat and slurped it into its vast mouth, engulfing Simancas totally for a few moments, before spitting him out unharmed.

"I thought I was dead," Simancas said. "I thought it had eaten me, that it had swallowed me." While he felt terror as the whale enveloped him, he said that fear only properly set in after he was released. "When I came up and started floating, I was scared that something might happen to my father too, that we wouldn't reach the shore in time, or that I would get hypothermia."

His father, though, had filmed the whole incident; on the video he can be heard saying "Stay calm, stay calm," and Simancas only took a few seconds to reach his kayak and clamber out of the water, and the pair were able to reach the shore safely. *theguardian.com, 13 Feb 2025.*

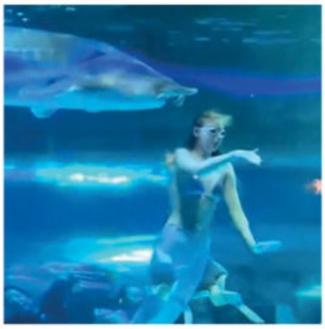
SNAPPED

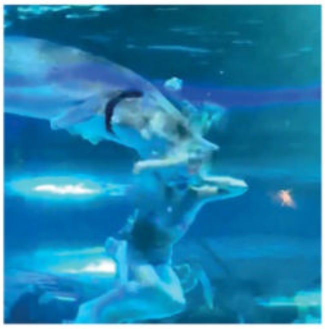
The Turks and Caicos islands have a reputation as an idyllic holiday retreat in the Caribbean, but it pays to respect the local wildlife, as a 55-year-old Canadian tourist discovered. While paddling in the shallow waters off Thompson's Cove Beach, Providenciales, the woman spotted what is believed to have been a bull shark and, island authorities say, "attempted to engage" with the fish and take a photo of it. It appears she was reaching out towards the shark trying to take a closeup, holding her camera in both hands, when the fish lunged and attacked her. It sank its teeth into both her arms and bit her hands off, one at the wrist and the other halfway down her forearm, as well as inflicting a wound on her thigh. Her husband was able to intervene and fight the shark off while the injured woman staggered back to the beach, where other family members attempted to stem the bleeding until emergency services arrived.



> *"I finished my solo and was supposed to surface, but a fish pounced on me.*

The shark, estimated to be at least 6ft (1.8m) in length, was excited by the blood, and circled off the beach for another 40 minutes, thrashing agitatedly, and the public were warned to stay out of the water until the all-clear was given, but the shark was not harmed. The victim was rushed to the Cheshire Hall Medical Centre for treatment, and later returned to Canada where she continues to receive medical care. The Turks and Caicos islands are not known as a hotspot for shark attacks, although in 2023 a 22-year-old American woman from Connecticut did have her foot bitten off in an unprovoked attack while snorkelling off the islands. *dailymail.co.uk, 14 Feb 2025.*





SHOCKED

China's Xishuangbanna Primitive Forest Park is famed for the mermaid shows it stages in a giant aquarium. One of the stars is a 22-year-old Russian woman named Mariia Zelenina, who performs under the name "Masha", wearing a fake mermaid tail and interacting with fish underwater in the tank.

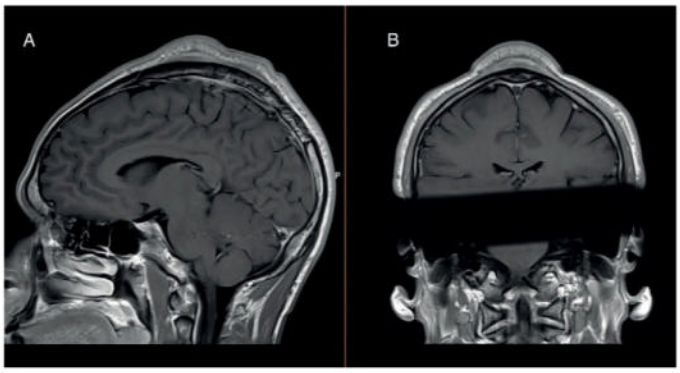
On 28 January, though, after 10 months of uneventful performances, Zelenina explains: "We had a show, I did the first solo, another girl was waiting for me to do my solo. I almost finished it and was supposed to surface, but a fish pounced on me." A Chinese sturgeon, a critically endangered species that can reach 16ft (5m) in length and lives in the Yangtze River, had grabbed Zelenina by the head and was holding on. "I didn't understand what was going on. I began to push her away and get out of her mouth. When I surfaced, I realised that I didn't have glasses," she said. "I was shocked – I didn't feel anything." Her goggles were pulled off in the encounter leaving her with severe bruising around her eyes and on her face, but Zelenina remains sanguine about the incident. "It was unexpected. Of course, I was scared, but a lot of things can happen in life, and you need to treat it with humour," she says. "I feel good. I remember this situation as a joke. I wasn't afraid of these fish."

After the incident, video of the attack went viral on social media, along with rumours that the Forest Park had forced Zelenina to immediately return to work, which she refutes. "I was immediately taken to the hospital," she says. "Foreigners are treated very well here." *people.com, 1 Feb 2025.*

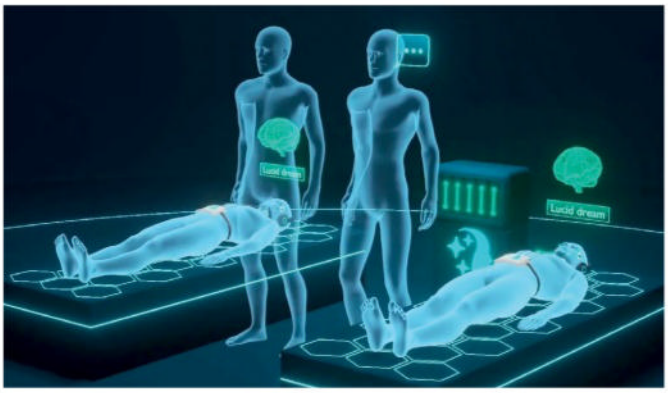
MEDICAL BAG

This month’s notable patients include the Italian man who lost 39 years’ worth of memories and the Danish breakdancer with a ‘headspin hole’

DAISUKE HORI / FACEBOOK



BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL



REMSPACE

ABOVE LEFT: Daisuke Hori. **ABOVE RIGHT:** An X-ray showing a Danish man’s ‘breakdance bulge’. **LEFT:** A graphic illustrating REMspace’s lucid dreaming communication.

NO SLEEP TILL HYOGO

Daisuke Hori, from Hyogo prefecture in Western Japan claims to have “doubled his life” by training his body to function effectively on just 30 minutes sleep a day. Hori, 40, says that “you can stave off drowsiness as long as you do sports or drink coffee an hour before eating,” and believes his approach has vastly improved his productivity. He claims that concentrating on getting a short burst of high quality sleep makes the rest of a night’s sleep superfluous, adding, “Those who require extended periods of concentration for their profession get more from quality sleep than duration. For example, firefighters and physicians rest for shorter amounts of time but still work very efficiently.”

Japan’s Yomiuri TV monitored Hori closely for three days, and found that he did indeed only sleep for very short periods during this time, on one occasion sleeping for just 26 minutes before waking up full of energy, having his breakfast, then hitting the gym before starting work. Hori, who has been a short sleeper for 12 years, is so confident about his technique that he has set up the Japan Short Sleepers Training Association and has taught more than 2,100 students the skill since 2016. *newsable.asianetnews.com, 3 Sept 2024.*

DREAM ON

California-based REMspace, a start-up aiming to enhance sleep and lucid dreaming, claims to have created an “apparatus” that allows two people in separate places to communicate through their dreams, although they have only communicated a single word between the users so far. The company explains that they used a “server” to detect when a trained participant entered a lucid dream, after which it sent them a one-word message via earbuds. The participant repeated the word while still in the dream state, which the server then captured and stored for the second participant. When the second participant entered lucid dreaming at a separate location eight minutes later, the server then sent them the first participant’s stored message, which they repeated on waking, and REMspace claims this demonstrates dream communication. The research hasn’t been peer reviewed or formally published, and no details have been released about the “apparatus” used. However, REMspace CEO Michael Raduga says, “This opens the door to countless commercial applications, reshaping how we think about communication and interaction in the dream world.” *the-sun.com, 14 Oct 2024.*

CONEHEAD

After carrying out intensive breakdancing training up to five times a week for 19 years, a man in his 30s from Denmark ended up with a massive lump on his head that required surgery to remove. In the case report, the *British Medical Journal* describes this as “a unique overuse injury in breakdancers caused by repetitive headspins”. The report reveals that during the man’s training sessions “there was direct pressure applied to the vertex of the head [from spinning on it] for durations ranging from two minutes to seven minutes” and that the lump had been developing for at least five years, during which “there had been a notable increase in its size and the onset of tenderness. The presence of the lesion and associated discomfort were æsthetically displeasing to the patient, but the protuberance had not hindered the patient from continuing his head-spinning activities.” Breakdancers call the affliction a “headspin hole” or “breakdance bulge”, but the doctors who treated the man say: “In radiologic descriptions, the term ‘cone-head sign’ is used.”

The unnamed breakdancer opted to have his lump surgically removed, rather than have it shrunk by steroid injections, and was pleased with the result, saying, “The outcome is much better than it looked before, and I am glad I had it done,” adding, “It is now possible for me to go out in public without a cap/hat, which is of course a very nice feeling.” *theguardian.com, 10 Oct 2024.*

TEEN ALZHEIMER’S

Medics at the Capital Medical University in Beijing, China, discovered that a 19-year-old man attending the university’s memory clinic was suffering from Alzheimer’s disease after he experienced a steady decline in his memory from about the age of 17, making him the youngest patient ever diagnosed with the disease. He had started to struggle with focus in class and began to find reading difficult. His short term memory declined to the point where he often could not remember events from the day before and was constantly losing his belongings. In the end, he was unable to finish high school, but remained capable of living independently.

The clinic found that his full-scale memory score was 82 per cent lower than that of most people his age, while his immediate memory score was 87 per cent lower. Scans showed that the patient’s hippocampus – a part of the brain crucial for memory – was shrinking, and tests found

ABOVE: Sixty-three-year-old Luciano d'Adamo believed he was still 24 when he awoke from a coma with no memory of the previous 39 years.

biological markers of Alzheimer's in his cerebrospinal fluid.

The man's case was unusual in that most Alzheimer's cases in patients under 30 are a result of pathological gene mutations, but his DNA showed none of these, nor had he suffered any diseases, infections, or head trauma that could have triggered his dementia, so his doctors concluded that "Exploring the mysteries of young people with Alzheimer's disease may become one of the most challenging scientific questions of the future." *sciencealert.com, 11 Oct 2024.*

INVOLUNTARY TIME TRAVEL

Sixty three-year-old Italian Luciano d'Adamo spent five months in a coma after a hit-and-run accident and on waking found that he had no memory of the previous 39 years. He believed he was 24 and about to be married to his 19-year-old fiancée, and was terrified when he saw his own face in the mirror. He had married his fiancé, but she was now 58 and d'Adamo did not recognise her when she spoke to him, and did not realise they had a son. "She called me 'Luciano' and I wondered how she knew my name," he said. "Later, a 35-year-old man also showed up, but how could a man born long before me be my son? And then what wife? I wasn't married, but engaged, and certainly not to that woman who must have been almost 60, but to a 19-year-old girl". He was also totally unaware of modern technology such as smartphones and the Internet, saying, "I still remember the amazement of travelling in a car that showed me a map of Rome on a screen, while a voice asked us to turn right in 100 metres." His memory has shown no sign of returning, so he has had to rebuild his relationships with his wife and son from scratch, and meanwhile has found work as a maintenance man in a school, which has helped him find some stability while he gets used to modern life. *thesun.co.uk, 22 Oct 2024.*

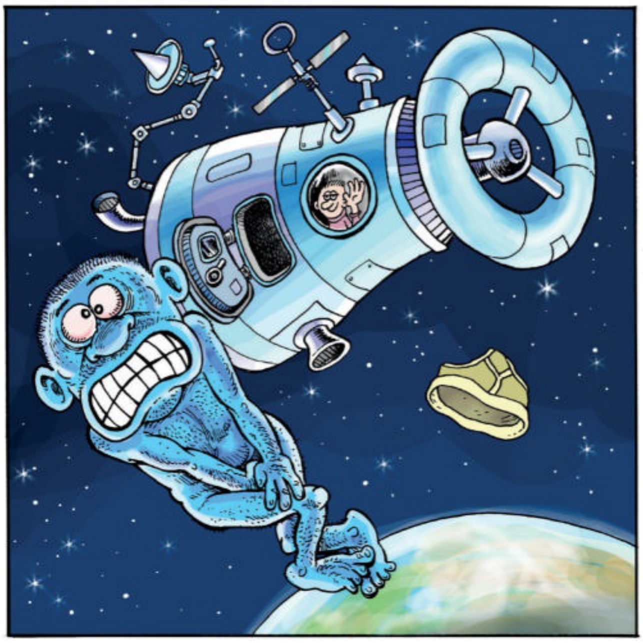
CAT CAT SCAN

When doctor Gianluca Fanelli's cat Athena was seriously injured falling six floors from a roof, he knew exactly what to do; he scooped the animal up and rushed her to the Umberto Parini hospital in Aosta, Italy, where he managed the radiology unit. There, he gave the animal a computer aided tomography (CAT) scan and then performed pneumothoracic surgery on her in the unit's angiography suite. "She was between life and death," Fanelli said. "I knew I could only save her with a quick intervention." The hospital took a different view, launching an internal inquiry into Fanelli's actions and referring the case to local prosecutors, who are considering charging him with wasting public money and depriving patients of essential services. Fanelli, though, remains unrepentant, pointing out that he used the equipment out of hours and when there were no patients requiring emergency scans. "I'm sorry if all of this led to a violation of the rules," he said. "If my cat had died, I would never have been able to forgive myself, especially because my children adore her." He added that he was willing to reimburse the hospital for any costs they had incurred due to his actions. *theguardian.com, 5 Feb 2025.*

MYTHCONCEPTIONS

by Mat Coward

289: NAKED IN SPACE



ILLUSTRATIONS BY HUNT EMERSON

The myth

Exposed to space without a spacesuit, the human body will instantly explode or else freeze and shatter like glass.

The "truth"

Neither fate awaits you, despite what it says in the films. True, you're still going to die (unless you're rescued very quickly, which seems unlikely given that your crew-mates have just tossed you out of the airlock wearing nothing but your innocence); however, your death will occur in minutes, not seconds, and it will be from asphyxiation. You won't immediately freeze, because you're in a vacuum and therefore losing heat slowly through radiation. The lack of atmospheric pressure does mean that your bodily fluids will start to boil and turn to gas, and therefore your bodily tissues will expand. But the human skin is sufficiently gas-proof and flexible to ensure that you don't go pop – no, not even your eyeballs.

Sources

www.space.com/how-long-could-you-survive-in-space-without-spacesuit; www.sciencefocus.com/space/what-would-happen-if-you-were-in-space-without-a-spacesuit; www.livescience.com/human-body-no-spacesuit

Disclaimer

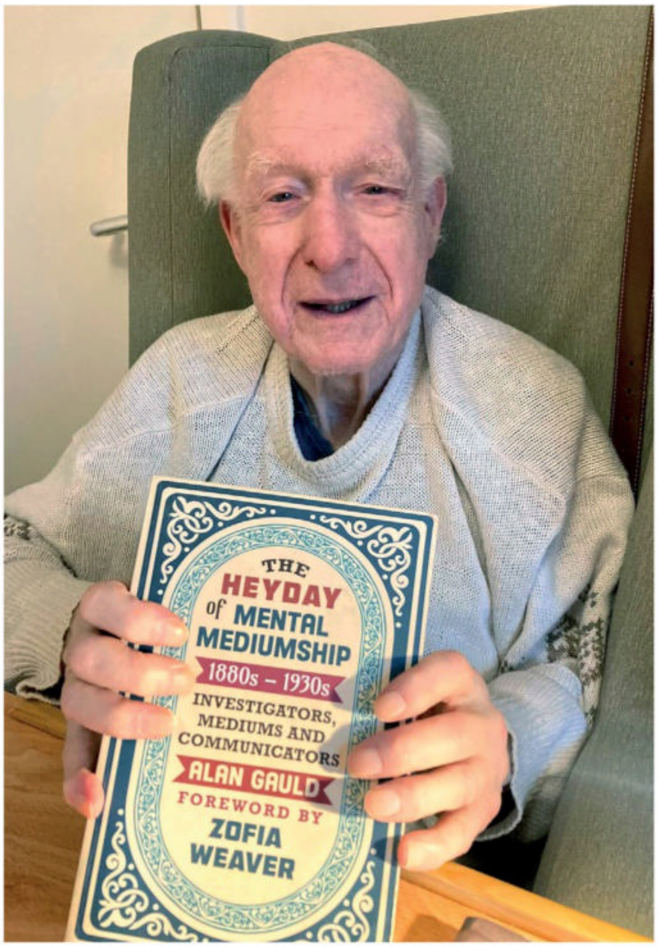
If exploding in space happened to you, please call the helpline. If some of the science here is wrong, please celebrate the miracle that some of it is right – and correct the rest via the letters column.

Update

The legend of the celebrity who enters their own lookalike competition and comes fourth is one of this column's long-standing obsessions (**FT152:26, 180:26, 225:17, 257:19, 281:21, 289:19, 306:17, 423:23**). The latest case looks like an example of ostension, where real life imitates myth. In October 2024, admirers of actor Timothee Chalamet staged a lookalike contest in Washington Square Park, New York City. A $50 first prize was offered and hundreds of people turned up – including Chalamet himself, who walked through the park in disguise before revealing his identity to astonished fans. Tragically, he didn't enter the competition. Just as well, perhaps: police declared it "an unscheduled demonstration" and several people were taken into custody.

NECROLOG

This month, we say farewell to a veteran psychical researcher and psychologist who combined hands-on investigation with a lengthy academic career



ABOVE: Alan Gauld with his last book, *The Heyday of Mental Mediumship, 1880s-1930s*, published in 2022.

COURTESY CALLUM COPPER

ALAN GAULD

Psychologist and revered psychical researcher Dr Alan Ogilvie Gauld demonstrated an unwavering life-long interest in ghostly phenomena and life after death. An active researcher over nearly 70 years from the 1950s through to the early 2020s, he investigated over 100 haunted locations and undertook in-depth studies of mediumship past and present. A respected council member of the Society for Psychical Research for many years and its President between 1989 and 1993, he also served on the editorial board of its *Journal* and knew more of the secrets of the Borley Rectory case than any man alive.

Born in Portland, Dorset in 1932, Gauld ascribed his interests to childhood influences in the 1930s when psychic themes were in vogue. An early stimulant was a Mickey Mouse cartoon, *The Lonesome Ghosts*, featuring a ghost hunter. Later, reading books about the real-life exploits of Harry Price at Borley Rectory, he maintained his enthusiasm through adolescence and army service. Upon reaching Cambridge to study history and natural sciences, he joined the Cambridge University Society for Psychical Research (CUSPR), immediately becoming involved in practical investigations and teaming up with ghost hunter Tony Cornell who lived in the city. Joining the Society for Psychical Research in 1954, he met such SPR veterans and luminaries as WH Salter and his wife Helen, a gifted medium involved in the famous cross-correspondence experiments between 1901-1932. Elderly members furnished him with recollections of original SPR founders such as Frederic Myers (1847-1901) including one who had known Edmund Gurney (1847-1888). These connections later inspired Gauld's book *The Founders of Psychical Research* (1968), shedding new light on these pioneering figures when their reputations were suffering attacks from revisionist critics such as Trevor Hall. On graduation, Gauld attended Harvard as an international George VI memorial scholar over 1956-57, returning to Cambridge to complete an MA in 1958 and his doctorate in 1962. Thereafter he joined the University of Nottingham as a lecturer and reader in psychology, specialising in biological processes and memory.

Another SPR associate was Guy Lambert, the leading proponent of the geophysical theory of poltergeist phenomena attributing manifestations to seismic tremors and underground water. Both Gauld and Cornell challenged this, following their experiences with the Hannath Hall poltergeist near King's Lynn over 1957-1958, and similarly countered the notion from Victorian times that naughty children were invariably behind disturbances. Hannath Hall was one of several occasions Gauld personally witnessed poltergeist effects he considered precluded any normal explanation ('A Fenland poltergeist' by AD Cornell and A Gauld, *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, 1960, vol.40, 343-358). Together with evidence of the Sauchie Poltergeist 1960-61, Gauld argued for poltergeists being proven as an unexplained phenomenon (See 'Poltergeists, Testimony and Scepticism' in *Light*, spring and summer 1964, vol.84, 11-17 and 87-94). Later with Cornell in their 1979 book *Poltergeists*, Gauld published a computer analysis of 500 historic poltergeist cases, establishing distinctive and recurring patterns within an otherwise incomprehensible mass of data.

In 1967 Gauld as SPR *Journal* editor oversaw a landmark paper on precognitive dreams of the Aberfan disaster by psychiatrist John Barker, still the leading study on disaster premonitions. In 1972 his Cambridge connections enabled him to rescue from folklore the history of the haunted Abbey House in the city, collecting the testimony from academics and their families from the early 20th century.

He built up an extensive archive on the Borley haunting, rejecting a number of the sceptical dismissals, and re-interviewing Charles Sutton, the first journalist to accuse Harry Price of fraud in 1948. He concluded Sutton's recollections were not in all respects perfect.

In 1977 Gauld contributed the section 'Discarnate Survival' for the *Handbook of Parapsychology* and later expanded this into his book *Mediumship and Survival* (1982), which provides one of the most in-depth reviews of the problems and evidence for consciousness enduring beyond death. Another major work was his 764-page *A History of Hypnotism* (1992), exhaustively documenting the growth and decline of hypnotism from clinical and social perspectives, from the rise of the international mesmerist movement in the 18th century through to its modern critics such as Theodore Barber. Drawing extensive praise from reviewers, philosopher Peter G Sobol hailed it as "an indispensable book for any future work on the history of hypnosis".

During this long career, Gauld could come over as a rather patrician and haughty critic, expressed in clashes with reflexive sceptics, gullible Spiritualists and researchers whom he felt did not know their facts – and sometimes with those who did! His 1993 SPR Presidential Address critiqued many of the "little 'psychical research' societies whose principal *raison d'etre* is to have a midnight frisson on their occasional 'ghost-hunts' and fun and buns at their occasional meetings" for failing to adopt scientific baselines and automatically assuming spirits were proven. Equally, the academic avoidance of psi research galled him, and he admitted to *Times Literary Supplement* that: "It is irritating, but the climate of our times is certainly less than sympathetic towards parapsychology." (*TLS*, 24 April 1998.)

Nonetheless, his insistence on high standards throughout translated into warm encouragement for a number of younger researchers and his championing of unlikely or unpopular viewpoints if supported by evidence.

In recognition of his contributions, Gauld received the Parapsychology Association's Award for Outstanding Contributions to Parapsychological Research, and the Myers Memorial Medal from the SPR. Following retirement from academia he continued on the SPR council, publishing articles and reviews and was particularly pleased when the Society took its conference to Nottingham in his honour in 2009.

Alan Ogilvie Gauld, pyschical researcher, born 5 June 1932, Portland, Dorset; died 23 Dec 2024, Nottinghamshire, aged 92.

FAIRIES, FOLKLORE AND FORTEANA

SIMON YOUNG FILES A NEW REPORT FROM THE INTERFACE OF STRANGE PHENOMENA AND FOLK BELIEF

PHANTOM FLORISTS

In 1968, a cyclist approaching the Boy's Grave near Kentford, Suffolk (see **FT393:18-21**), found his front wheel rising mysteriously upward, forcing him to dismount. He wasn't alone in this peculiar experience – another local reported the same uncanny mechanical rebellion at this precise spot. The grave in question – a modest mound between road and trees on the ancient Icknield Way – had already accumulated more mysteries in its relatively short history than most consecrated plots gather in a millennium.

Most persistently, there are the flowers. For over a century, fresh blooms have appeared on the grave, placed by 'hands unseen'. In 1934, the historian John Saltmarsh became so intrigued by these mysterious offerings that he kept a detailed diary of them – recording everything from elaborate wheat arrangements to carefully positioned wild blooms. A passing tramp woman even stopped him to ask if he was the secret caretaker (he wasn't). She nevertheless took a shine to him: "If I was as young as my daughter is, you and me'd go for a joy-ride together!"

A racing connection adds another layer of otherworldly influence. By the 1940s, locals insisted that the colours of flowers blooming on the grave on Derby Day foretold the winner's racing silks. Even more tellingly, horses themselves sensed something amiss – shying away from the tree (or was it the old road sign?) where the shepherd boy (or was it a gypsy lad, or a stable boy?) ended his life (or was he murdered, or did he die in an accident?). You were supposed to raise your hat when you passed the grave whichever variant of the legend you believed: I've counted nine different versions.

HORSES SENSED SOMETHING AMISS, SHYING AWAY FROM THE TREE WHERE THE SHEPHERD BOY ENDED HIS LIFE

So who did leave the flowers? Suspects have included: road-menders, gypsies, children, Newmarket jockeys, a mysterious woman from London and ghosts. In fact, American airman John Dwyer spent 14 hours watching the grave in 1965, hoping to catch phantom florists at work. But all to no avail. Fresh flowers still appear, and a recent video speaks of inexplicable car failures at the grave. The 'boy' is evidently adding to his repertoire now that horses and bikes are rarer.

Something about this lonely spot has drawn not just supernatural tales but also more than a century of anonymous care – a different kind of mystery, and perhaps a deeper one. The explanation? To be buried at the crossroads the 'boy' was almost certainly an 18th- or 19th-century suicide: burial at the crossroads for self-murder was only banned by Parliament in 1823. The ritual of locals secretly leaving flowers seems to be a last ripple of subaltern sympathy. After all, this adolescent forfeited his place in consecrated ground perhaps 200 or 300 years ago.

Flaps and fantasies

NIGEL WATSON reports on an iconic pair of torn trousers, Paul McCartney's UFO musical and more...

RIPPING YARN

The *Scottish Sun*, 2 Feb 2025, published a lovely story entitled "UFO hunter slams Scots museum bosses over rejecting bizarre exhibit". This was about an infamous pair of trousers ripped by aliens (**FT31:30, 56:48, 64:9, 189:29, 223:26, 273:26, 411:46-47**). As Scottish UFO research Malcolm Robinson explains: "These trousers were worn by a forestry worker [Bob Taylor] back in 1979 when he went about his day job in Dechmont Woods near Livingston, Central Scotland. His testimony was that he encountered a large dome-shaped UFO in a clearing in the woods where, soon after, two spherical devices descended from beneath the larger craft, impacted on the ground, then rushed towards him grabbing him by rod-like extensions at his hips, tearing the trousers in the process. A full police enquiry followed, as it was classed as an assault by person or 'persons' unknown. The trousers were subjected to forensic testing by scientists in Edinburgh and the case exploded massively not just here in the United Kingdom, but all over the world."

Despite the otherworldly importance of the trousers, when Malcolm asked if he could donate them to the National Museums of Scotland, they refused, saying that they already have similar items (!?); they later stated they did not have the space or capacity to accept all the donations offered to them.

The Archives for the Unexplained (AFU) in Sweden has in its collection the police jacket worn by PC Alan Godfrey when he encountered a hovering craft over a road in Todmorden, in 1980 (**FT269:44-47, 270:46-49, 325:27, 326:27, 327:29, 328:28-30**). If Malcolm decides to donate the unwanted strides to AFU, Bob's trousers and Alan's jacket would make a fine ensemble. www.thescottishsun.co.uk/news/14195174/ufo-hunter-alien-scots-museum-bizarre-exhibit; www.afu.se/about-afu/

UFO FLAP IN WALFORD?

The 20 January 2025 episode of the soap opera *Eastenders*, for a few seconds showed a notice board in the square for the Walford Gazette announcing "UFO Researchers Move in After Flap of Sightings in Walford". Is this a prelude to Walford being invaded? Stranger things have happened; indeed, it is fairly common that characters return from the dead or reappear with a different face and body as if they have been (badly) cloned! At the time of writing nothing further has been revealed...

His testimony was that he encountered a large dome-shaped UFO in a clearing in the woods

LEFT: Bob Taylor's famous torn trousers. **BELOW**: The *Walford Gazette* reports on a UFO flap in *Eastenders*.

UFOLOGY
RESEARCHERS
MOVE IN AFTER
FLAP OF
SIGHTINGS
IN WALFORD

UFOS GO DUTCH

Directed by Bram Roza, *The UFOs of Soesterberg* is billed as the first Dutch UFO documentary. It opens with witnesses expressing their reluctance to report their experiences because people either make fun of them or simply do not believe them.

The film centres on the many sightings at Soesterberg Air Base. Fred Van Den Broek returns to where he saw three bright lights at 10.30pm in October 1979 near the base; he heard no sounds. He reported the sighting, but nothing was detected on radar and there was no further interest in it.

On 3 February 1979 at 5.45am, Corporal Rob Jansen, a military police officer at the base, saw three lights passing over, stalling the engine of his jeep and causing the dashboard lights to go out. At four other locations on the base other witnesses also saw this silent triangular object, displaying bright lights, fly overhead.

As he walks in the grounds of the Royal Netherlands Army Du Moulin Barracks, Michel Den Hartog recalls that when he was training there in 1991, he and a colleague saw a UFO as they were patrolling the shunting yard. It was a large oval object full of pulsating coloured lights. After 15 minutes his colleague shone his torch on it and in response the UFO flashed twice and then shot off at "warp speed". Not long afterwards they were both flung forwards by a strong force and ran away in a state of panic. They told the Company Commander, but decided not to officially report it. Hartog then suffered two days of violent vomiting and a few weeks later, when he was at home, started getting mysterious telephone calls from people with American accents who wanted to know more about his sighting. The whole thing traumatised him for 20 years. A caption notes that neither the Commander nor Hartog's colleague could be traced, and there is no record of the incident in the Army archives.

The US military occupied Camp New Amsterdam, which was part of the base, but it operated completely independently. As one witness states, the Americans were very mysterious. They were a closed group and kept things secret. There were rumours that nuclear weapons were stored there, and it has been suggested that this is why the base was targeted by UFOs. Robert Hastings, who has campaigned rigorously in the USA to show that UFOs are attracted to nuclear sites, is wheeled out to bolster this claim. It is noted that a terrestrial enemy was more likely to take an interest in such sites, especially during the Cold War.

There seems to be a running theme that UFOs are attracted to USAF bases, and the Soesterberg sightings have been compared to the UK's Rendlesham Forest Incident (**FT204:32-39** and passim): both raise questions about the testing of secret USAF stealth aircraft and the spread of rumours and other forms of disinformation.

On a more mundane note, the military argued that the Soesterberg lights and craft were a mirage caused by car headlights reflecting from a layer of air. Yet, the witnesses all deny this and are still puzzled by what they saw.

Such explanations are not relevant to the story of Sergeant Major Johannes Bruinier, as recounted by his two sons. They say that in 1972 their father awoke to see a bright light, and drove his car to the base where he saw a landed UFO with entities inside it.

COURTESY BRAM ROZA

ABOVE: Dutch director Bram Roza, whose film *The UFOs of Soesterberg* is billed as the first UFO documentary from the Netherlands. **BELOW**: Paul Mcartney and Wings surveying Earth on the cover of *Back to the Egg*.

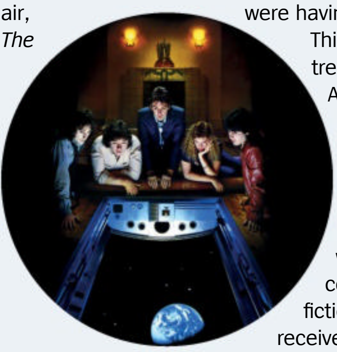
He passed it off as a strange dream, but a circle was found at the landing location along with a broken chain that he says he saw the UFO blast into pieces.

Finally, there is an anonymous report from someone in the locality who was walking through some woods when everything went quiet just seconds before he saw a large black disc hovering above the ground. After running away in panic he got home to realise he had lost three hours of time. He still has dreams about it.

The documentary effectively uses animation and illustrations to depict these strange experiences. Most of all, it gives these people a sympathetic platform to tell their stories; and like them we are left to wonder…

The film won a Gold Award at the Fortean Film Festival 2024 and has been screened at numerous international film festivals.

UFOLOGICAL BEATLEMANIA



Allan Kozinn and Adrian Sinclair, while researching their book *The McCartney Legacy: Volume 2: 1974-80*, discovered a 400-word treatment by Paul McCartney entitled "Five and Five and One." This was to be a musical about five aliens who come to Earth in a flying saucer and clone themselves as members of Paul's group Wings to take America by storm. Sinclair observed that: "Paul's treatment reads like something Paul and Linda cooked up while they were smoking something particularly potent."

McCartney discussed the idea with science fiction writer Isaac Asimov, hoping they could collaborate on the project. Asimov changed it to feature energy-beings from a dying planet who only communicate through thought waves and study music to understand human emotion. McCartney was not impressed by the rewrite, and on the cover of his treatment Asimov scribbled: "Nothing ever came of this because McCartney couldn't recognise good stuff."

It was not altogether surprising that McCartney came up with this idea. He he was a science fiction fan and Susan Sackett, a long-time girlfriend of Gene Roddenberry, the creator of *Star Trek*, remembers that in the 1970s: "Paul contacted him and was a *Star Trek* fan. He invited us to a concert, which was great, and we met backstage. Paul hired Gene to write a story about the band and it was a crazy story. Paul gave him an outline and Gene was supposed to do something with it. It was bands from outer space and they were having a competition."

This sounds very much like the treatment Paul had given to Asimov, although it did not get beyond the discussion stage.

UFOs and science fiction were very influential in this period, and there was another Beatles connection. The science fiction writer Philip K Dick received benevolent enlightenment from the songs of the Beatles. At the beginning of 1974 he received mystical messages from a force he called the Vast Active Living Intelligence System (VALIS; see **FT161:42-46, 162:24-25, 258:44-46**). He believed that thousands of years ago a craft sent by three-eyed crab-like beings from the star Fomalhaut came to Earth and helped to create human civilisation. They returned home, leaving VALIS to inspire and cajole key individuals to keep us on track. The communications from VALIS often came to him at night and provided him with information about the aliens' complex control of humanity. One such message came to him while he was listening to the song "Strawberry Fields Forever" on the radio. VALIS used The Beatles song to tell him: "Your son has an undiagnosed right inguinal hernia. The hydrocele has burst, and it has descended into the scrotal sac. He requires immediate attention, or will soon die." He rushed his son to hospital and found that this diagnosis was correct. VALIS, through the Beatles, saved his son's life. The VALIS visions also indicated that the California of 1974 was as corrupt as the Roman Empire, which led him to predict the downfall of President Nixon.

In the same year John Lennon famously saw a UFO over New York on 23 August. It was a hot evening and at about 8.30pm John was on his apartment's roof terrace when he had the urge to look up. Seeing a strange object in the sky he called out to girlfriend May Pang. On joining him, she saw something like a large flattened cone with a bright red light on top of it at a distance of only 100ft (30.5m) away. The object, the size of a Lear jet, moved silently towards them and as it did so it revealed a dazzling row of flashing white lights along its rim. Lennon thought it was so close you could almost touch it and Pang confirmed that it was so close you could have thrown something at it. After a few minutes, the UFO passed over the United Nations building, veered left over the East River and after moving over Brooklyn it merged with the air traffic over southern Long Island.

In 1974, was VALIS influencing Paul and John to make them see UFOs over New York City or think of alien-themed musicals? Or were they all "smoking something particularly potent" as Sinclair suggested?

The nearest Paul got to the "Five and Five and One" project was the alien-themed cover of his aptly named, in the light of Jake Barber's recent revelations (**FT455:4-5**), *Back to the Egg* album. This has Paul and the other Wings members looking down at the Earth from the hatch of an Art Deco spaceship. And we shouldn't forget his 1975 album *Venus and Mars*, which also has a touch of the extraterrestrial as he waits for "Starship 21ZA9" to arrive for a "strange vacation".

It's worth adding that Paul's High Park Farm in Kintyre, Scotland, is located near Machrihanish Airbase, which was used by the USAF to test secret aircraft and as an emergency landing site for the space shuttle. Not surprisingly, it was rumoured that this was the UK's equivalent of Area 51 and that UFO research and activity occurred at the site. Ah, those mysterious Americans again!

DEATH BY FAERY?

THE STRANGE CASE OF NETTA FORNARIO

NINA ANTONIA revisits the short life and mysterious death of Netta Fornario, whose fascination with the realms of faery and the mystical arts took her from the occult ferment of post-Golden Dawn London to a lonely end on the isolated Scottish island of Iona.

'How beautiful they are
The lordly ones
Who dwell in the hills,
In the hollow hills'
Fiona Macleod – 'The Immortal Hour'

To go in search of the unknown can be a perilous path. One such unfortunate was student of the occult Norah Fornario, who leaves behind an incomplete life and a cautionary tale. Wild conjecture about her death in November 1929 has sprung up like a dense mass of tangled weeds. From the outset, Miss Fornario's curious demise was obscured by sensationalised newspaper reports. The cauldron of speculation was kept on the boil by authors such as Francis King, who covered the case in the best-selling 1970 book *Ritual Magic.* In more recent times, a concoction of imaginative misinformation has made a minor Internet cult out of the ill-starred young woman who sought direct contact with the Faerie Folk.

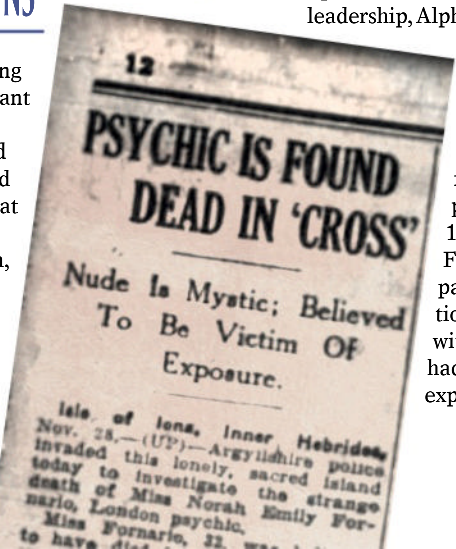
THE SEARCH

Of Italian-English heritage, Marie Edith Emily Norah Fornario was born in Egypt, a favourite haunt of her parents, in 1897. During the course of her short life, Miss Fornario reinvented herself on several occasions, first by peeling away all of her cumbersome first names except for Norah, after her mother. Later, she was to call herself Netta, possibly to symbolise a rebirth in the mysteries. The great esoteric movement that gathered pace at the close of the 19th century reflected a thirst for enlightenment which the young woman shared. In a 1928 essay published in the *Occult Review*, Netta observed: "The true evolutionary purpose of Imagination is to enable the personality to quarry from the dull uninspiring grind of everyday life, material which shall be transformed by the alchemical action of spiritual potencies into a universal temple…"

DURING THE COURSE OF HER SHORT LIFE, NETTA FORNARIO REINVENTED HERSELF ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS

The search for something more than mundanity meant that a magical order such as the Golden Dawn could not only flourish but could boast a membership that at different times included WB Yeats, Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood and Constance Wilde, the wife of Oscar. Although the order had been founded upon an elaborate fabrication, the rituals devised by one of the GD's creators, Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers, were convincing and sophisticated. Often described as eccentric, Mathers nevertheless was an esoteric adept who conceived a complex system of attainment that ranged from neophyte to all-knowing Ipsissimus, a title Aleister Crowley was keen to obtain. Unwittingly, Mathers helped to derail the Golden Dawn by fast-tracking Crowley to the Second Grade in his Parisian home. The London lodge of the Golden Dawn, with Yeats at the helm, refused to acknowledge The Great Beast's magical promotion and both Mathers and Crowley were expelled from the order. The Golden Dawn's peak period was considered to be 1892-1896, after which it began to fragment; to quote Yeats in his apocalyptic poem 'The Second Coming': "Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold."

From the ashes of the Golden Dawn rose multiple splinter groups, including the Alpha et Omega Temple, which contained the last of Mathers's devotees. After 1918, when Macgregor Mathers went to join the Secret Chiefs for all eternity after contracting influenza, his widow Moina (born Mina Bergson) ran the Temple in conjunction with respected Scottish occultist JW Brodie Innes. Despite Moina's allegedly erratic leadership, Alpha et Omega was still charged by the fading light of her late husband's occult energy. Although it was not the temple of learning that 19-year-old Violet Firth had anticipated upon initiation, the AO was not without merit: "I had considerable experience of practi-



12

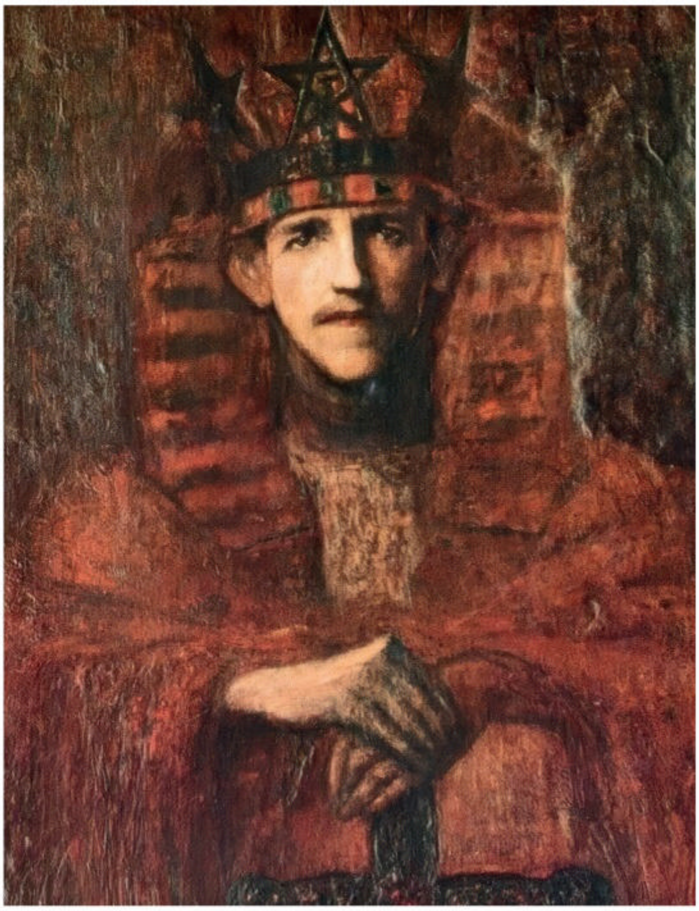
PSYCHIC IS FOUND DEAD IN 'CROSS'

Nude Is Mystic; Believed To Be Victim Of Exposure.

Isle of Iona, Inner Hebrides, Nov. 28.—(UP)—Argyllshire police invaded this lonely, sacred island today to investigate the strange death of Miss Norah Emily Fornario, London psychic.

Miss Fornario, 32,

ILLUSTRATION BY ETIENNE GILFILLAN. MODEL: BALI AT ATLANTIS BOOKSHOP



ABOVE LEFT: British occultist Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers, who co-founded the Order of the Golden Dawn. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Moina Mathers, who continued her late husband’s legacy as leader of the Alpha et Omega order. **BELOW:** The entrance of 73 Mortlake Road, Kew, Netta Fornario’s London home.

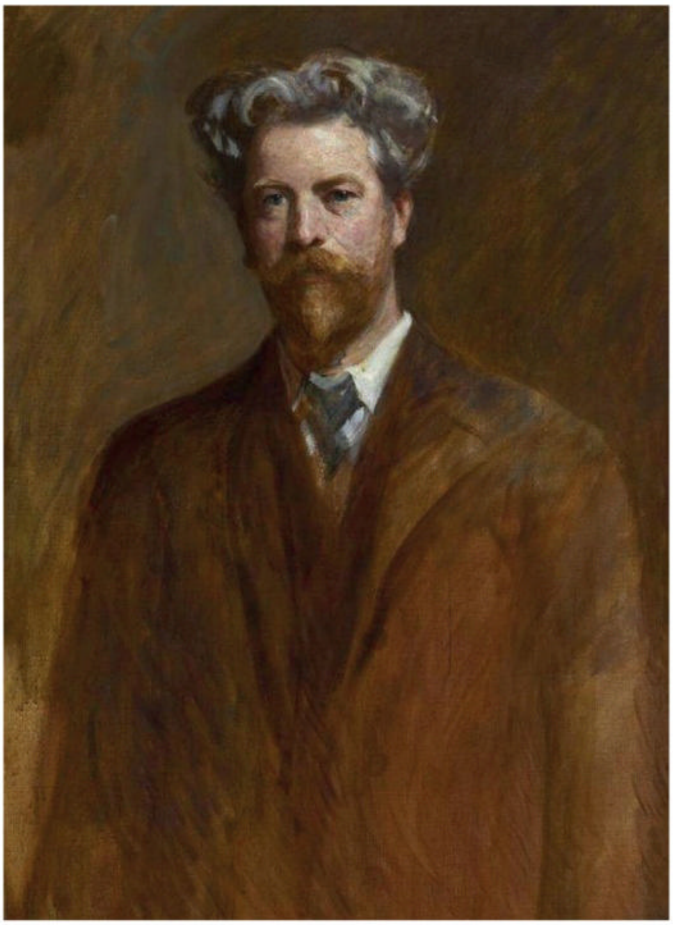
cal occultism before I made its acquaintance and I immediately recognised power of a degree and kind I had never met before and had not the slightest doubt but that I was on the trail of the genuine tradition, despite its inadequate exposition.”

Another young AO initiate, Netta Fornario, was not quite so experienced in the mystical arts as Violet Firth, although she was dressed for the part. Favouring flowing Arts and Craft style tunics, which would be described as ‘Boho’ today, Netta complimented her look with chunky jewellery and wore her dark hair in long plaits. Her fervour for the occult matched that of Violet and they struck up a friendship based on their common interests. Unusually independent, Miss Fornario had received a generous inheritance from her maternal grandfather, which had become available via a trust fund on her 18th birthday in 1915. To some degree, this was to be Netta’s undoing as she was able to indulge her fascinations in a way that most young women of her time were unable to do.

However, her freedom had come at a price. Her mother, Norah, died before her first birthday and her heartbroken father, Guiseppe, returned to live in Italy, leaving his daughter with her affluent grandparents. She was to visit Guiseppe several times, although she was granted UK citizenship in 1922. Using her inheritance, Netta had purchased a large, attractive house in a leafy, discreet neighbourhood: 73 Mortlake Road, Kew, Richmond. She engaged a motherly housekeeper, Miss Varney, who was wise enough to accept her youthful employer’s mystical tendencies. In a later interview, the housekeeper explained her role: “I had to do everything for her – even put her to bed at night – and serve her meals. She was like a child.”

SHE ENGAGED A MOTHERLY HOUSEKEEPER WHO ACCEPTED HER YOUTHFUL EMPLOYER’S MYSTICAL TENDENCIES

The house was divided into two flats, with Netta taking the upper floor. Tellingly, the family who lived beneath her cut short their tenancy due to Miss Fornario’s “peculiarities”. Not only did she hold séances alone, but also welcomed her few friends to join her in attempts at communing with the beyond. At least one newspaper report featured a quote from a former resident who claimed that after Netta completed her schooling in Eastbourne she spent time in a mental health institution. Regardless of conjecture, Netta’s vulnerability was apparent, thus rendering her magical preoccupations all the more dangerous. Of particular concern to Miss Varney was the young woman’s practice of going into trance states: “She would shut herself up in her room, put blankets over her head and a large white sheet over her hands and shoulders. Covered in this way she would remain for hours and sometimes days and tell me afterwards that she had healed people by telepathy and had some extraordinary visions. Several times she said she had been to the ‘Far Beyond’



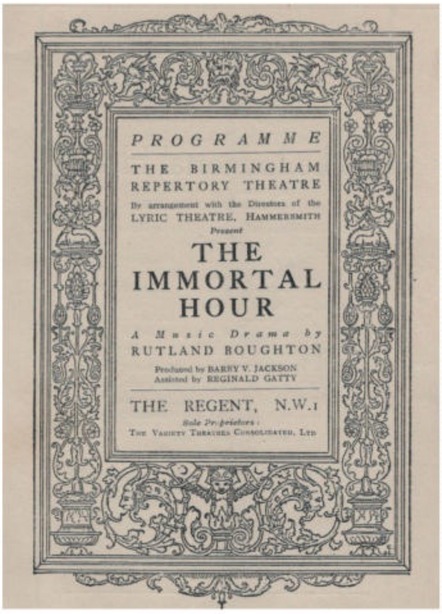
RYE HOBIE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE LEFT: William Sharp, better known as the Highland chronicler of Faery, Fiona Macleod. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Violet Firth transformed herself into the celebrated occultist Dion Fortune, with whom Netta enjoyed a close friendship for some years. **BELOW:** The programme for *The Immortal Hour*'s 1922 London performance.

and had come back to life after spending time in another world." Miss Varney feared that Netta would one day go into a trance from which she could not return.

THE INNER LIGHT

When entering a religious order, a change of name signifies spiritual transformation. A similar procedure was adopted by occultists; most famously, the aforementioned Violet Firth became 'Dion Fortune', who would rise to become one of the period's most celebrated esoteric visionaries. Netta Fornario, meanwhile, evolved into the seemingly obscure 'Mac Tyler', which she also used as a 'nom de plume'. The rationale behind choosing the name Mac almost certainly alludes to the Highland chronicler of Faery, Fiona Macleod. Of moderate talent but prodigious literary output, Fiona attempted to do for Scottish folklore what Yeats had achieved for Ireland's. Unlike Yeats with his thoughtful, poetic sensibility, Macleod produced a sprawling patchwork of Celtic hyperbole. However, the entity known as Fiona Macleod didn't really exist, being the pseudonym of William Sharp, a bookish fantasist. Macleod's biographer, Steve Blamires in *The Chronicles of the Sidhe* (Skylight Press 2012) reflects upon the author's dual nature: "The revelation of the Faery mysteries… was addressed to readers who did not know that she [Fiona] was a Faery and that she used the physical body of William Sharp to actually put pen to paper."



PROGRAMME

THE BIRMINGHAM
REPERTORY THEATRE
By arrangement with the Directors of the
LYRIC THEATRE, HAMMERSMITH
Present

THE
IMMORTAL
HOUR

A Music Drama by
RUTLAND BOUGHTON

Produced by BARRY V. JACKSON
Assisted by REGINALD GATTY

THE REGENT, N.W.1
Sole Proprietors:
THE VARIETY THEATRES CONSOLIDATED, LTD

Like many others, Netta had assumed that Fiona Macleod was a woman. Whether anyone aside from her biographer believed that she was a Faery hasn't yet been ascertained. Fiona had permanently departed for the Faery Realm in 1905, when William Sharp died. However, her play *The Immortal Hour* was to enjoy a posthumous production when adapted as a 'music-drama' by composer Rutland Broughton and staged at the Regent Theatre, London, in 1922. Inserted in each slender programme was a guide to the drama, which was described as "the story of the winning back of the wayward or wanderer to a former state of happiness". An enchanted Netta Fornario was to attend the production 23 times. Inspired, she wrote a feature-length review of *The Immortal Hour* as Mac Tyler, in January 1923. Netta was an intelligent woman, but the article lacks critical perspective and displays the kind of credulity that was ultimately to lead to her doom.

The feature commences with a description of the audience, who are separated into four distinct categories: the first, to which Mac belongs, are the "students of mysticism and folklore who are able to understand the greater truths concealed behind the gossamer curtain of Faery". As for the rest of the audience, the better ones appreciate the beauty of the production, but are nevertheless "hopelessly baffled by their inability to interpret the intricate symbolism". It would not be unreasonable to suggest that Mac believed she belonged to a mystically illuminated coterie. Her lofty idealism did not waver after Dion Fortune was expelled from the AO when Moina Mathers claimed to have seen something amiss in the younger woman's aura. The expulsion may have had something to do with Dion Fortune's occult ambitions as she rapidly outgrew the Alpha et Omega Temple. According to Fortune, in her most popular book, *Psychic Self-Defence*, Moina subsequently unleashed a vituperative psychic attack upon

RUTLAND BOUGHTON.

LEBRECHT MUSIC & ARTS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

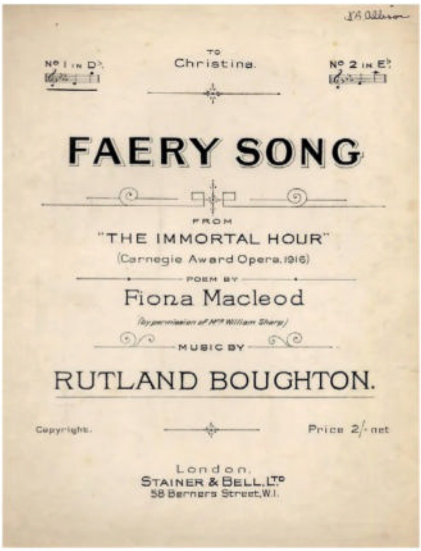
PHOTO BY
CLAUDE HARRIS
W. JOHNSTONE-DOUGLAS
QU.—B

LEFT: Rutand Boughton, composer of *The Immortal Hour*. **ABOVE:** W Johnstone Douglas as Eochaidh High King of Ireland in the Regent Theatre Production of 1922. **BELOW:** Sheet music for Boughton's 'Fairy Song', a setting of Fiona Macleod's poem.

her. Needless to say, when Dion started her own mystery school, The Society of Inner Light, Netta followed. This must have been a golden time for her, as Dion Fortune notes in *Psychic Self-Defence* that for three years they had an "intimate friendship" and did a great deal of work together.

Unfortunately, two significant incidents were to cast a shadow over the remainder of Netta's brief life. The first involved an intense magical working performed while visiting Glastonbury Tor with the Society in May 1926. Allegedly, during an invocation those present experienced a huge energy surge, which Netta perceived as direct communication from 'Green Ray Elementals', otherwise known as the Faeries. According to the teachings of The Inner Light, contact with Green Ray Elementals can induce "an inebriation of the soul", but "this path may also have its dangers for it tends to turn in upon itself and issue from whence it came. It may become a fixed state and not a Path, and the soul lingering there may be overtaken by night".

We will never know if any private conversations took place between Fortune and Fornario following the Glastonbury working. One thing is certain: whatever jolted 'Mac' happened under the auspices of the Society. In *Psychic Self-Defence*, Fortune elucidates upon her former friend, stating that she was "especially interested in the Green Ray elemental contacts, too much interested in them for my peace of mind, and I became nervous and refused to co-operate with her. I do not object to reasonable risks… but it appeared to me that 'Mac', as we called her, was going into very deep waters, even when I knew her, and that there was certain to be trouble, sooner or later." Fortune perhaps feared as much for the reputation of the 'Society' as she did for 'Mac', and the two women went their separate ways.


J.B. Allison

Nº 1 in D♭.

TO
Christina.

Nº 2 in E♭.

FAERY SONG

FROM
"THE IMMORTAL HOUR"
(Carnegie Award Opera. 1916)

POEM BY
Fiona Macleod
(by permission of Mrs William Sharp)

MUSIC BY
RUTLAND BOUGHTON.

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"THIS PATH MAY ALSO HAVE ITS DANGERS FOR IT TENDS TO TURN IN UPON ITSELF AND ISSUE WHENCE IT CAME"

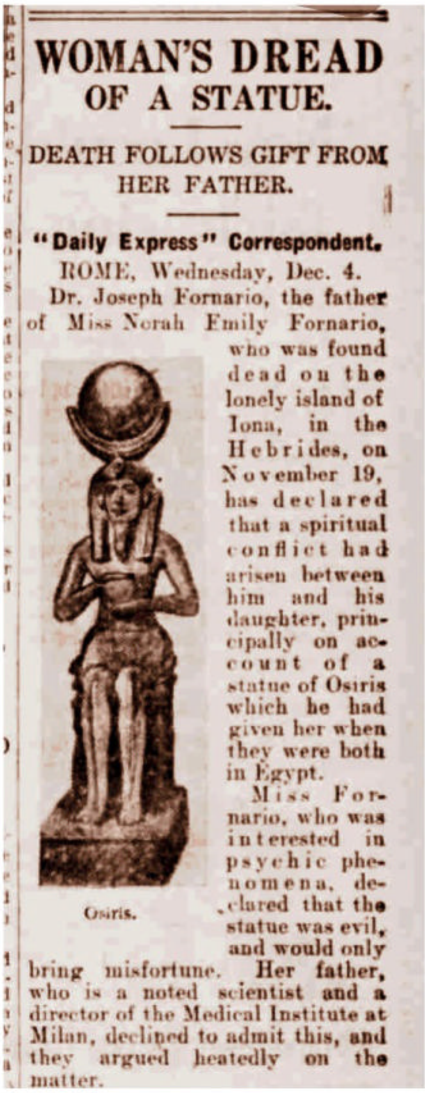
Adrift from her Inner Light associates, Netta Fornario entered the final phase of her life, which had become increasingly isolated. Many press reports published after her death stated that Netta had issues with her father, yet she accepted an invitation to holiday with him in Egypt in 1928. It must have been an emotional reunion, especially for Guiseppe, as in his daughter he would have seen something of his late wife, who had as deep an appreciation for Egypt as her husband did. Although a Christian who did not agree with Netta's beliefs, Dr Fornario appears to have studied Egyptian mythology, including their deities; surprisingly, this was to be the cause of some friction. Attending a street market, Guiseppe purchased a statuette of Osiris as a memento of the vacation for his daughter. Netta initially refused to accept the gift, proclaiming, "Osiris is the symbol of tragedy and violent death. If you remember your Egyptian mythology, Osiris was murdered and his spirit became the Judge of the Dead. I'm sure the statue will bring me all kinds of bad luck." Her father refused to take her objections seriously, responding, "Don't be silly, Norah, Osiris was the god of light and health and virtue. I insist that you get over these absurd notions and do me the honour of accepting the gift." Eventually, Netta consented, while issuing a stark warning that if anything happened to her, the blame was to be upon Dr Fornario. The holiday was to be the last time Guiseppe saw his daughter. He would later give an interview to an Italian paper that was translated by the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, which ran the story with the dramatic headline "Weird Death of Scientist's Daughter Linked with Cursed Statue". According to Ben Oakley in his book *Death on Iona*, Guiseppe continued to tease his daughter about her good health

ABOVE: In 1914 Rutland Boughton founded the original Glastonbury Festival, where *The Immortal Hour* was first staged. **BELOW:** A news report from the *Daily Express*, 5 Dec 1929, recounting the story of the statue of Osiris given to Netta Fornario by her father.

despite the influence of Osiris. This fatherly banter was to continue until August 1929, when Netta Fornario embarked for Iona.

THE HILL OF DREAMS

An isolated Scottish Island, Iona was the cradle of Celtic Christianity for over 600 years. Founded by St Columba in around 575 it remains a spiritual hub attracting pilgrims as well as tourists in the summer season. In her *Collected Papers* Christian mystic Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941) recalls the tale of a traveller who tells an elderly Highlander that she has just visited Iona. He responds: "Ay, Iona is a very thin place." The traveller asked him to explain the meaning of 'thin place'. The old man responded that "there's no' much between Iona and the Lord." Today, the expression is used to denote the numinous and the presence of divinity as well as the unearthly. One reminder of the Island's pre-Christian past is the Fairy Hill or 'Sithean Mor' where, if approached correctly, the Little People will grant wishes. The Hill has also been referred to as 'Cnoc nan Aingeal' as it is the location where St Columba was seen conversing with angels. Of course the Fairy Hill would be bound to hold an attraction for Netta, but why was she drawn to Iona in the first place? The key is most likely the 'Faery woman' who put the 'F' in Iona – none other than Fiona Macleod, whose fantastical writing about the beautiful, remote island would have called to Netta Fornario's faery-haunted heart.



WOMAN'S DREAD OF A STATUE.

DEATH FOLLOWS GIFT FROM HER FATHER.

"Daily Express" Correspondent.

ROME, Wednesday, Dec. 4.

Dr. Joseph Fornario, the father of Miss Norah Emily Fornario, who was found dead on the lonely island of Iona, in the Hebrides, on November 19, has declared that a spiritual conflict had arisen between him and his daughter, principally on account of a statue of Osiris which he had given her when they were both in Egypt.

Osiris.

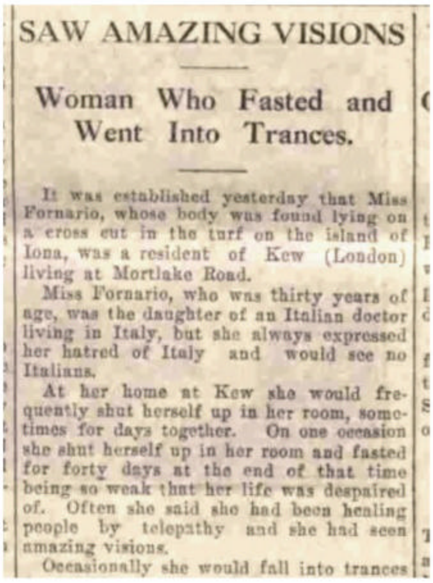
Miss Fornario, who was interested in psychic phenomena, declared that the statue was evil, and would only bring misfortune. Her father, who is a noted scientist and a director of the Medical Institute at Milan, declined to admit this, and they argued heatedly on the matter.

Escorted by an unknown female companion, Netta arrived on Iona with enough luggage to suggest that she intended to stay for some time. Once settled in lodgings organised ahead of the journey, the companion, most probably Miss Varney, departed. From this point, Netta was to rapidly go into freefall, despite a promising start. According to Steve Blamires, Netta at first resided with a Mrs MacRae, who spun a great many tales of local fairy folklore to her entranced new lodger. Blamires in his second study of Macleod, *The Little Book of the Great Enchantment*, notes that William Sharp, as a frequent visitor to Iona, had also lodged with Mrs MacRae some 30 years earlier. Francis King avers much the same, minus any references to Sharp. However, Ben Oakley in *Death on Iona* states that he checked the island's records only to discover that no one called MacRae had lived on Iona during the 1920s. What we do know is that Netta stayed in an attic room at the family home of Catherine and Donald Cameron and their three children. The Camerons' remote, picturesque croft should have provided the perfect respite for their bohemian boarder. Netta set up her typewriter on the small desk in the attic and gave much of her energy to writing. She was also observed while sitting on the shore with a pen and notebook, in which she was absorbed.

The remainder of her visit was spent much as it had been in London, going into trance states. Worryingly for Miss Varney, she had received a letter from Netta claiming that she had a "terrible healing case on" and would be staying on the island for the foreseeable future. Unconventional as ever, Netta had warned the Camerons never to call a doctor if anything happened to her. This may have been a reaction to her father or even a fear of being institutionalised once more. Nevertheless, as the days passed, the young woman's behaviour became

ALLAN WRIGHT / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: In August 1929 Netta set out for the isolated Scottish island of Iona, where she would spend her last days. **BELOW:** Newspaper coverage of Netta's mysterious death ranged from the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* of 29 Nov 1929 (below) to the *Brooklyn Eagle* of 12 Jan 1930 (bottom).



SAW AMAZING VISIONS

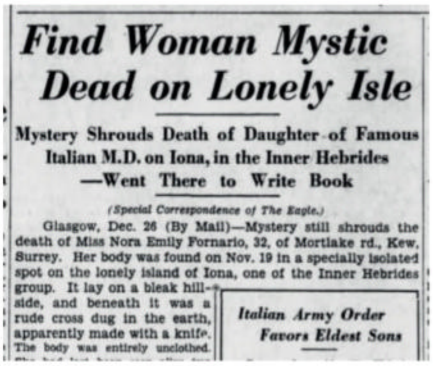
Woman Who Fasted and Went Into Trances.

It was established yesterday that Miss Fornario, whose body was found lying on a cross cut in the turf on the island of Iona, was a resident of Kew (London) living at Mortlake Road.

Miss Fornario, who was thirty years of age, was the daughter of an Italian doctor living in Italy, but she always expressed her hatred of Italy and would see no Italians.

At her home at Kew she would frequently shut herself up in her room, sometimes for days together. On one occasion she shut herself up in her room and fasted for forty days at the end of that time being so weak that her life was despaired of. Often she said she had been healing people by telepathy and she had seen amazing visions.

Occasionally she would fall into trances



Find Woman Mystic Dead on Lonely Isle

Mystery Shrouds Death of Daughter of Famous Italian M.D. on Iona, in the Inner Hebrides —Went There to Write Book

(Special Correspondence of The Eagle.)

Glasgow, Dec. 26 (By Mail)—Mystery still shrouds the death of Miss Nora Emily Fornario, 32, of Mortlake rd., Kew, Surrey. Her body was found on Nov. 19 in a specially isolated spot on the lonely island of Iona, one of the Inner Hebrides group. It lay on a bleak hillside, and beneath it was a rude cross dug in the earth, apparently made with a knife. The body was entirely unclothed.

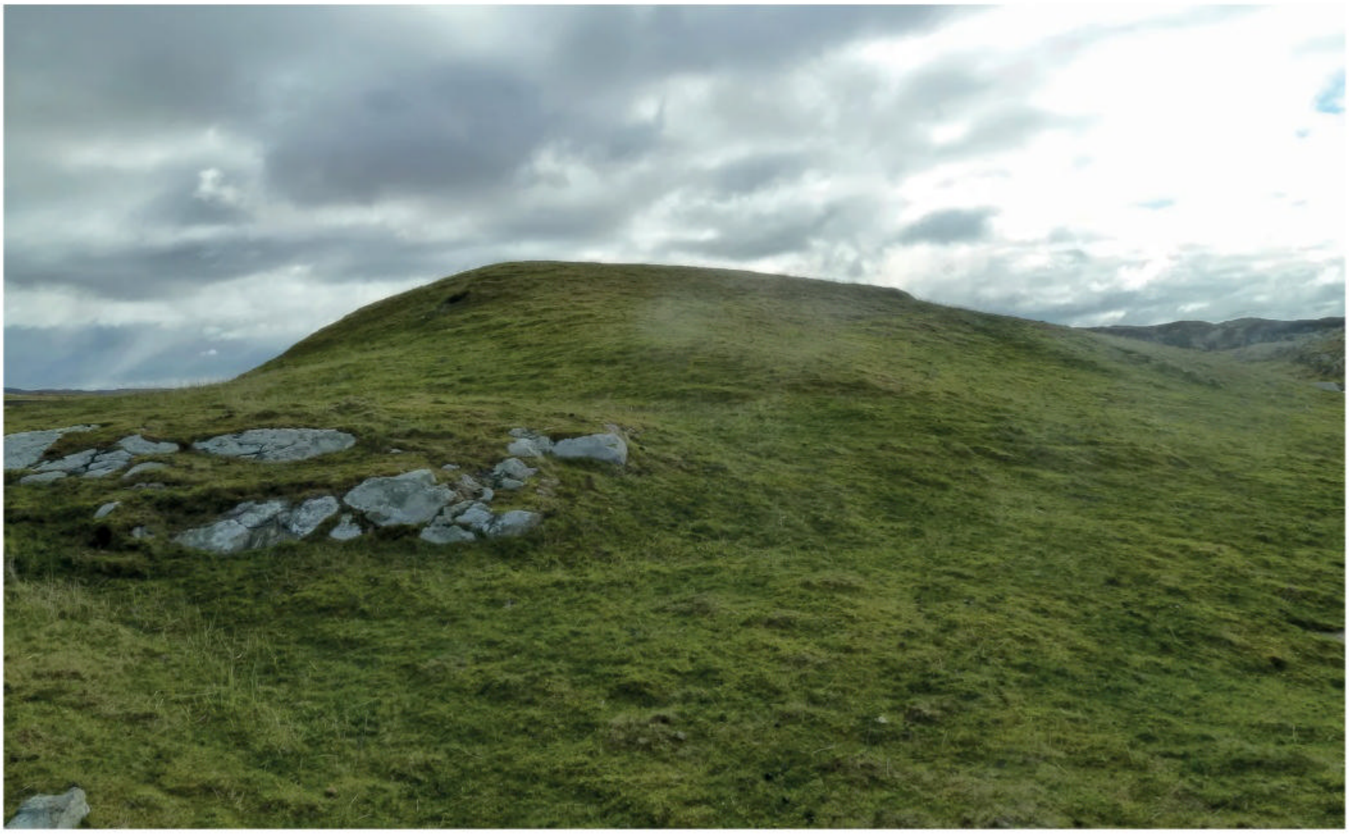
Italian Army Order Favors Eldest Sons

increasingly unsettling, culminating in long nocturnal walks that sometime took in the Fairy Hill.

Autumn does not loiter long in Scotland and the weather was already bowing to winter's inclemency and yet the wanderer, who must have seemed more ghost than human on her midnight forays, took little heed of the cold. Following these moonlit perambulations, Netta tended to sleep for most of the day, but on Sunday 17 November, she rose early and notified the Camerons that it was imperative she leave Iona immediately. The only way to depart from the island was by ferry, but as Donald and Catherine are said to have told her, they didn't run on the Sabbath. In spite of their advice, she still went to the shore for verification – not a single ferry in sight. Netta had no choice but to return to her lodgings, where she locked herself in for the remainder of the day. In the evening, she briefly emerged from the attic and, to the relief of the family, appeared to have calmed down.

The next morning, when breakfast was brought up to the attic, there was no sign of Netta. Police officers from nearby Mull were called in to step up the search once the Islanders failed to find her anywhere amid Iona's craggy terrain. Her body was eventually discovered by two farmers on the afternoon of Tuesday 19 November. Although news travelled more slowly in 1929 than it does today, the press in the UK, as well as in the US and Italy, hyped up the lurid elements of the case. The *Daily Chronicle* was to go overboard: "Doctor's Daughter who Dabbled in the Occult", "Woman of Mystery Dead on Lonely Isle", "Mystic Journey to Seek the Unseen". The furore and embellishment surrounding Miss Fornario's death was worthy of a story by Fiona Macleod, whose Scottish lilt Netta had followed, like one of the children in thrall to the Pied Piper, all the way to the magical hill. In Italy, one newspaper noted that Professor Fornario had received a telepathic message concerning his daughter's death. However, the most commonly reported and relatively sane statements concur that death was likely due to exposure. In an unbalanced state, Netta Fornario left the safety of the attic room and plunged into the frosty darkness, shoeless and wearing nothing but a black cape. The only item she took with her was a kitchen knife. One odd detail for someone who refuted conventional religion was the fact that she was found wearing a silver crucifix and that she had allegedly carved a cross into the turf where she was found.

We will never know exactly what happened to Netta in the depths of that chill November night. Scratches on her feet suggest she may have been running to keep herself warm or doing magical circuits around the Fairy Hill, nine times being the traditional number of laps to rouse 'The Gud People'. In the process of dying, many people hallucinate; perhaps Netta confused such hallucinations with 'visions'. As her life ebbed away, she may have seen something that so unnerved her that she was compelled


LAURA COULSON / FAERYFOLKLORIST.BLOGSPOT.COM

ABOVE: Iona's Fairy Hill or Sithean Mor, where St Columba was believed to have conversed with angels and where Netta Fornario's body was discovered by local farmers on 19 November 1929.

to carve a cross in the turf for protection; or was she desperately trying to reach the Faeries deep below Iona's venerated ground?

At the end of *The Immortal Hour*, one of the main characters in a state of anguish cries out: "My dreams, my dreams, give me my dreams!" To which "a shadow god" of the Faery folk responds: "There is none left but this… the dream of death." The steadfast community of Iona clubbed together to pay for Netta's funeral on the island. She was buried in the company of kings and chieftains in the grounds of the old Abbey. Indicating a life cut short, her grave stone is that of an open book, now moss embedded, bearing her initials and date of death: 19 November 1929.

The author would like to thank PA Morbid of the Black Light Engine Room Press for searching out newspaper reports pertaining to the case. The author is less grateful to the archives department of the London Borough of Richmond Upon Thames, who claimed they could find nothing online or in their records about the former resident of 73 Mortlake Road, Kew, Richmond.

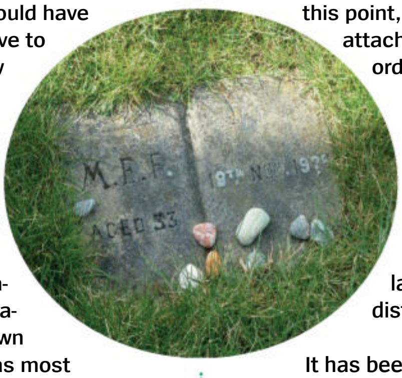
NINA ANTONIA is a former music journalist, who has contributed to *Uncut*, *Mojo*, *Classic Rock* and *Record Collector*. For *Fortean Times* she has written about Oscar Wilde, Lionel Johnson and representations of Fairyland in British postcards. She is the author of *The Greenwood Faun* (2017) and *Dancing with Salome* (2021) and the editor of *Incurable: The Haunted Writings of Lionel Johnson* (2018).

FANTASY ISLAND: DEBUNKING SOME NETTA MYTHS

Despite Francis King using the chapter heading "Mrs Mathers Accused of Murder" in his Ritual Magic and drawing heavily on Dion Fortune's account in *Psychic Self-Defence*, it is highly unlikely that Moina would have returned from the grave to launch an otherwordly attack on Netta Fornario.

It has been stated that Fortune accompanied Netta to Iona, but they had already parted company and gone their separate ways. The unknown female companion was most likely housekeeper Miss Varney.

Suggestions that Aleister Crowley murdered Netta Fornario on Iona because it was feared that she would divulge the secret knowledge of the Golden Dawn are also unfounded; Netta was never a member of the Order.



LAURA COULSON / FAERYFOLKLORIST.BLOGSPOT.COM

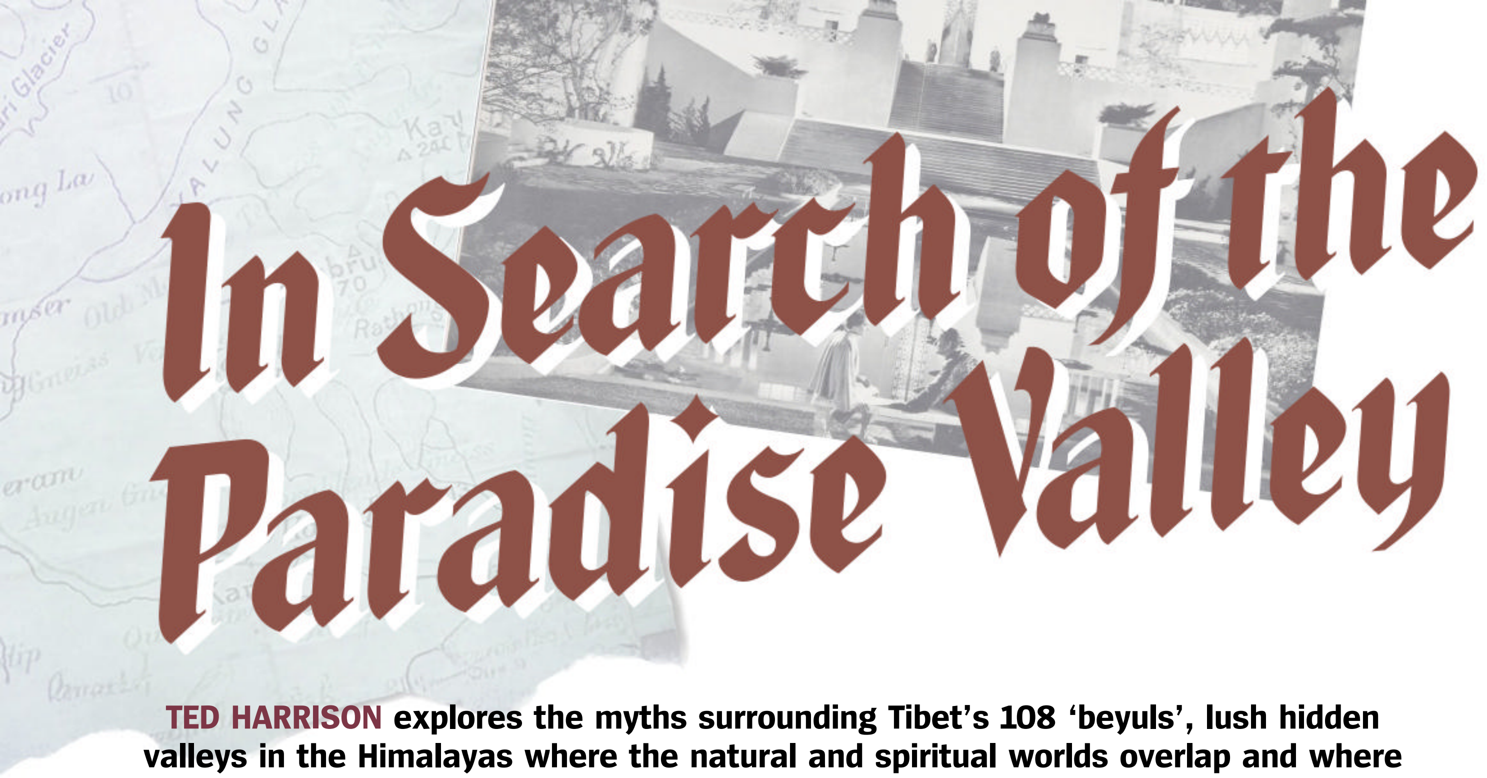
BELOW: Netta Fornario's grave in the grounds of Iona Abbey.

Claims that there was Golden Dawn or Occult insignia on the victim's cape are also groundless. Netta wore bohemian clothing, and what better than a cape to wear while exploring the island? By this point, she was no longer attached to any magical orders.

Blue lights seen in the vicinity of the body, sometimes described as orbs or faeries, may have been torches or lanterns seen from a distance.

It has been suggested in online forums that Netta had wandered into a reversal of the plot of *The Wicker Man*. Being a 'witchy woman', she was condemned by the superstitious islanders and put to death. The residents of Iona may have been isolated, but they were quite used to all manner of seekers and pilgrims.

The most commonly used image of 'Netta Fornario' online is actually that of Moina Mathers.



In Search of the Paradise Valley

TED HARRISON explores the myths surrounding Tibet's 108 'beyuls', lush hidden valleys in the Himalayas where the natural and spiritual worlds overlap and where anyone who gains entry to them will live in happiness for 1,000 years...

Somewhere, according to rumour and ancient tradition, in a secret and hidden valley deep in the Himalayas, there is a community of people who live in perfect peace and harmony and survive to exceptional old age.

It was James Hilton's 1933 novel *Lost Horizon* that popularised this idea and gave the world a new word – 'Shangri-La' – to describe a paradise on Earth, free of war and crime, in which was preserved a cultural treasure-house of wisdom.

Hilton's fiction caught the public imagination at a time of particular international tension. Yet the idea of there being a natural utopia waiting to be discovered, one that was completely cut off from the rest of the world and untroubled by the world's problems, is far from new.

There were many stories and legends that triggered Hilton's imagination, including the ancient Tibetan myth of the kingdom of Shambhala (see **FT175:30-39, 302:32-37, 324:28-35, 436:36-41**). It was written about in ancient esoteric texts which told of a people who had achieved enlightenment, living lives immune from suffering. In some traditions, it is said, at a time when the world is on the verge of devastation, the king of Shambhala will come to the rescue and create a world of peaceful order.

THE BEYUL TRADITION

In his book *The Heart of the World* writer and traveller Ian Baker described how on a journey into the Himalayas he met a lama named Bhakha Tulku Pema Tenzing who told him tales of Beyul Pemako, the ultimate place of pilgrimage, where, if you could succeed in finding it, you would live to be 1,000 years old and at the point of death dissolve into the colours of the rainbow.

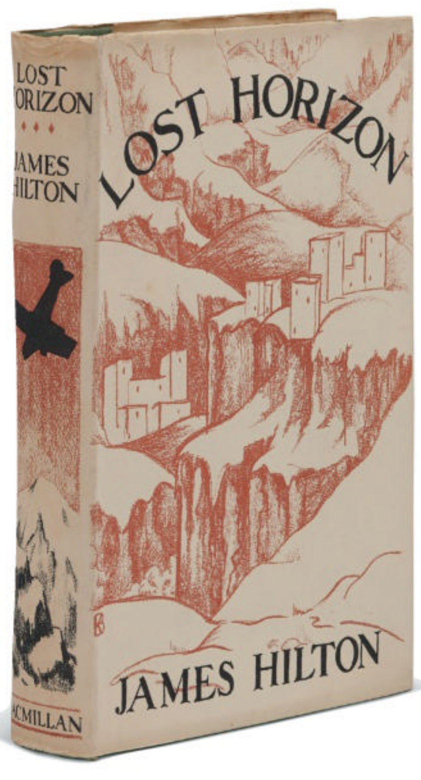
Bhakha Tulku told of how he had in 1956 been guided by a white musk deer to a sacred mountain believed to be the gateway to Pemako's innermost realm. However, like many travellers before him, he found no way to enter. Bhakha Tulku said that one lama had once entered through a passage behind a waterfall into a mystical valley, "but the way is lost now".[1]

Beyul Pemako is one of a rumoured 108 'beyuls', or hidden paradise valleys, that will one day serve as places of refuge, but according to legend their exact locations will only be revealed when the world is in danger of destruction.

Hilton's fiction caught the public at a time of particular international tension.

Twenty years ago, Ian Baker took a journey into the remotest of areas where Pemako is said to be. He and his party of Buddhist explorers found a high waterfall hidden inside a canyon that no one had previously known of. It matched ancient descriptions of the gateway, but no Earthly paradise was discovered as the opening was beyond his reach. "The elliptical opening in the side of the gorge was suggestive of hidden worlds and birth tunnels into new states of existence. At the same time it was a simple geological fault and unlikely to penetrate deeply into the rock."

Tibetans, he said, allow such structures to "guide more exalted thoughts and alternate ways of seeing... Standing between the falls and the unreachable doorway encircled by towering cliffs we shared the moment with our Tibetan companions, each in our own way, beyond time and geography."[2]



The beyul tradition goes back to a mysterious figure and Buddhist master from the 8th century AD – Padmasambhava. He was a key figure in bringing Buddhism to Tibet and many stories were told and hagiographies written about him. It is said he left hidden texts to be discovered at a later date by chosen followers. They were secreted under rocks, inside caves and stupas. The texts, when eventually discovered, would act as guides, or maps, to finding the beyul refuges.

According to the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism, which dates from the 8th century, a beyul is a place where the physical and spiritual worlds overlap. Yet a beyul cannot be entered by just anyone. Entry can only be gained after much hardship by those of pure heart. Anyone else, trying to gain entry is likely to die.

RAQUEL MOGADO / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: Colourful fields of amaranth at harvest time in the remote Tsum Valley, Nepal. **BELOW LEFT:** French explorer Jacques Bacot heard tales of Beyul Pemako while travelling through Tibet in 1907. **BELOW RIGHT:** Russian traveller Nicholas Notovich was told stories of Jesus training as a Buddhist monk.

In 1962, a lama named Tulshuk Lingpa said that he had a map to lead him to the Beyul Demoshong, the entrance to which was on the slopes of Mount Kanchenjunga. He travelled to the mountain with around 300 followers. He went ahead with a small support party on reconnaissance and is said to have seen bright lights calling them toward a gateway. But rather than entering the beyul, Lingpa returned to gather up all his followers, wrote Thomas K Shor in his book *A Step Away from Paradise*. Unfortunately, instead of crossing a magical threshold into a paradise valley, most of the group – including the lama – were killed by an avalanche.

A French explorer called Jacques Bacot encountered the myths of Pemako when travelling in Tibet in 1907. He was shown a guidebook by a group of pilgrims in which Pemako was described in mystical terms and likened to the terrestrial body of a goddess.

In the library of one monastery, Ian Baker was shown further descriptions of the place in a collection of old manuscripts. "Pemako is shaped like a womb. All its trees are perfumed like sandalwood and jasmine. Saffron grows like grass. Wheat, barley and rice grow wild and honey is found in abundance… The rivers flow with Amrita the colour of milk. When you drink it you will never feel thirsty. All fruit and water are medicinal. Everyone will become joyous and prosperous. Old men will become youthful… The happiness and enjoyments here are equal to a god-realm. Even without meditating anyone who teaches here can attain the state of a Buddha." [3]

"Some of these beyuls," wrote Stuart Butler in a BBC travelogue, "such as in Sikkim in north-east India and the Helambu, Rolwaling and Tsum valleys in Nepal – have been known about by Buddhist practitioners for centuries and are now dotted with villages and towns. Then there are those where the location is known but is inaccessible to most. This is because a beyul can be both a physical place and a spiritual place. It's said that a person could even be stood in a beyul but not be inside it." [4]

These hidden paradises may be cut off from the world, but the wisdom preserved there need not be confined to them. In 1894 the Russian Nicholas Notovich published an account of an early journey by a European into the Himalayas. [5] His book told what seemed like a preposterous story – that during the undocumented years between the childhood of Jesus and his ministry, he travelled to the region to train as a Buddhist monk.

Notovich had heard the story when

LEFT: The Tibetan mystic Tulshuk Lingpa, who died with hundreds of his followers in an avalanche while searching for the entrance to Beyul Demoshong. **BELOW:** Frank Capra's 1937 film of James Hilton's *Lost Horizon* further popularised the Shangri-La myth in the West.

staying at a monastery in the highlands of Ladakh, India. He was allowed to inspect texts telling of a man called 'Issa' who studied the Vedas with Brahmin priests before travelling on to Tibetan monasteries in the Himalayas to study, returning eventually to his home in Judea via Persia (see **FT183:28-32**).

Added to his supposed trips to the southwest of England, Jesus clearly had a busy time during his lost years. Official Christian teaching acknowledges nothing of this rumour that Jesus visited one of the hidden paradise valleys to learn the ancient esoteric wisdoms of the ancient masters. However, in his later teaching, as described in the Bible, Jesus did talk of his kingdom not being of the world, not of this place.[6] A concept, it could be said, with a very Buddhist resonance.

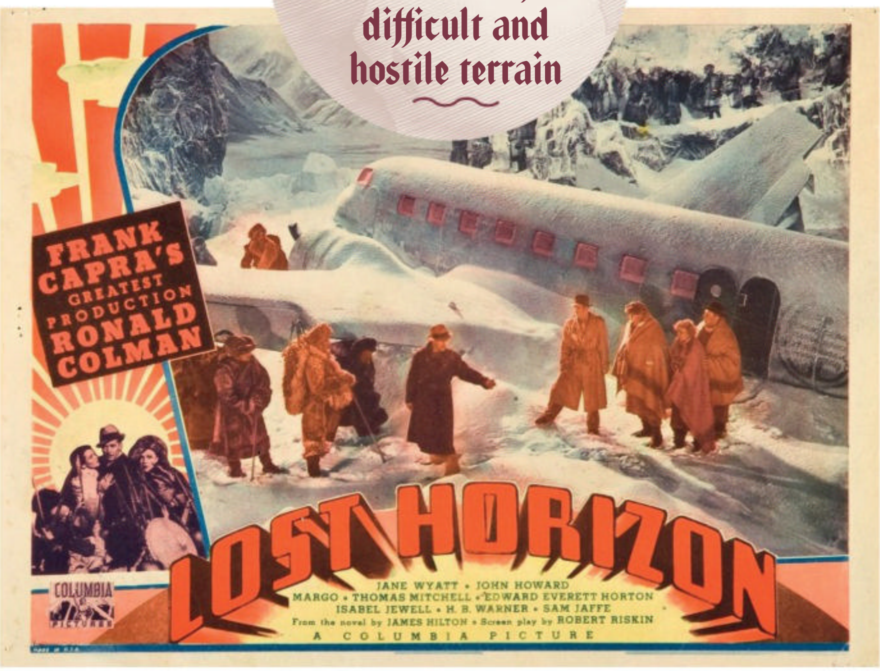
SPIRITUAL LANDSCAPES

The first European who travelled to Tibet and returned with extraordinary tales was 17th century Portuguese priest Antonio de Andrade. He was well-received by the Tibetan people and set up a short-lived Christian mission there. In his description of Tibet he talked of having a map which took him through difficult and hostile terrain until he reached a new and impressive kingdom. His account was republished in 1926 and was also one of the influences that shaped Hilton's 1933 novel and the idea of Shangri-La.

There is a confusing crossover between a beyul as a geographic location and a beyul as a spiritual identity. So, even if one is known about by local people, pinpointing it on a map is difficult.

Writing in 2009, Amy Corbin said that a person might follow instructions from the ancient texts but still not be able to see or experience the beyul if not in the proper spiritual state. "Beyul are religious conceptions, but because of the reverence with which they are treated by local residents, hunting, fighting and disturbing the natural landscape are considered inappropriate behaviours and are avoided. As a result, beyul have become significant oases of biodiversity as well. They typically have plentiful water coming from the surrounding mountains, and their terrain is covered with forests, lakes, alpine meadows, and snow and ice fields. These valleys cover large areas and have vast elevation ranges. Their size and topographic variations provide a home for a diverse array of plants and animals; their isolation and inaccessibility generally means low levels of human disturbance. The sacredness of the beyul also means that human conflicts are spiritually

Andrade talked of having a map that took him through difficult and hostile terrain


FRANK CAPRA'S GREATEST PRODUCTION
RONALD COLMAN
LOST HORIZON
JANE WYATT • JOHN HOWARD
MARGO • THOMAS MITCHELL • EDWARD EVERETT HORTON
ISABEL JEWELL • H. B. WARNER • SAM JAFFE
From the novel by JAMES HILTON • Screen play by ROBERT RISKIN
A COLUMBIA PICTURE
COLUMBIA PICTURES

BLUE JEAN IMAGES / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: The Yarlung Tsangpo river in Tibet, where explorer and writer Ian Baker (below left) believed he had found the 'Hidden Falls' that marked the entrance to Beyul Pemako; Baker had been told about this 'paradise valley' 20 years earlier by the lama Bhakha Tulku Pema Tenzing (below right).

discouraged."[7]

Today, however, modernisation and global economics are encroaching on the sacred places. China is currently planning a dam that would flood much of the sacred area where the spiritual location of Beyul Pemako is said to be. But even without major civil engineering projects, the protected areas of the Himalayas, that were once safeguarded by faith and cultural traditions of the long-term inhabitants, are being invaded by outside influences. Unregulated trekking and adventure tourism is taking its toll on fragile areas, with the litter and detritus of modern living being left as evidence.

Local cultural values are being eroded and traditional knowledge lost as children get access to the digital outside world. As Amy Corbin noted 14 years ago, the beyul are beginning "to lose their grip on people's minds".

Perhaps now is the time of world danger when the beyul as foretold by the ancient masters will be revealed.

Yet the ancient stories were, in all probability, just that – stories. The existence of oasis-like, fertile valleys hidden in and among the mountains of Himalayas is probable. They can be found and form delicate ecosystems that are now under threat. That they are the homes of wise elders of extraordinary wisdom and age is, as yet, unconfirmed.

There are certainly reports of people in parts of the region living to a great age. In the early 1970s, *National Geographic* investigated claims of longevity around the world and took a particular interest in the inhabitants of the Hunza Valley, a high-altitude and isolated fertile valley in Pakistan. At the time it had a population with a large number of active elders, but claims that many had exceeded the normal life expectancy by several decades have been challenged, with a lack of accurate birth records cited.

But explorers and pilgrims will undoubtedly continue to search for true Shangri-las in hope, if not expectation. Whether such mysterious sanctuaries can be located geographically in the mist-shrouded mountains "is of secondary importance to the journey itself," wrote the Dalai Lama. "In the Buddhist tradition the goal of pilgrimage is not so much to reach a particular destination as to awaken within oneself the qualities and energies of the sacred site, which ultimately lie within our own minds."[8]

NOTES

1 Ian Baker, *The Heart of the World*, Souvenir Press, 2004, p.3.

2 Ibid., p.402.

3 Ibid., p.37.

4 www.bbc.com/travel/article/20220830-the-himalayas-hidden-paradise-valleys.

5 Nicolas Notovitch, *The Unknown Life of Jesus Christ*, 1877.

6 John 18:36.

7 https://sacredland.org/beyul-of-the-himalaya-nepal-tibet-india/

8 I an Baker, Foreword to The Heart of the World.

TED HARRISON was a writer, artist, filmmaker and former BBC religious affairs correspondent. He was a regular contributor to *Fortean Times* and the *Church Times* for many years and the author of books about the religious dimensions of Elvis Presley, End Time myths and stigmata.

LONDON UNCANNY

IN PURSUIT OF DISTURBANCE AND DREAM

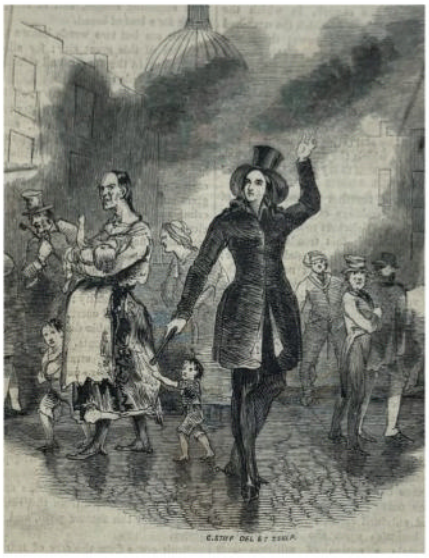
Introducing his latest book, ***London Uncanny***, **CLIVE BLOOM** invites us to explore the most liminal of cities by walking the haunted streets of the metropolis and excavating its many layers of Gothic secrets...

London is an uncanny space. Is it a conglomeration of mere concrete and asphalt or a territory both of fantasy and phantasy, locked into the head, through imagination, the unconscious and the presence of others, of those who wander its streets dreaming? To ask if London exists in many forms is only an absurd question if we discount the many ways it does exist. Its origins are approximately 2,000 years old, and for some dreamers, considerably older; it is a city of bizarre 'facts' gathered from the rubbish heaps of forgotten lore and custom resonant with hidden signs and symbols, a city to be read and constructed; for others, it is the city of ghosts and revenants, a night time place of alleys and fog; for others it is the city of dereliction where adventurous urban explorers find solace in abandoned psychiatric hospitals, dank tunnels and musty warehouses; while, for most, it is the town of the harsh reality of the daily, sweating commute, or roadworks, coffee breaks and the journey home disrupted by Underground failures, the piles of street waste narrowly avoided, the ubiquitous cardboard signs of the homeless in search of bed and a meal, the dirty and dishevelled human equivalent of the uncanny encounter wilfully ignored, not out of malice, but because we don't want to spend time with the misery of the streets with which we have only a fleeting and temporary acquaintance.

TRINITY MIRROR / MIRRORPIX / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

LEFT: A policeman using flames to direct the traffic in London smog, 1952. **BELOW:** A page from George WM Reynolds's *The Mysteries of London* (1844).

URBAN EXPLORERS FIND SOLACE IN ABANDONED PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITALS AND DANK TUNNELS



THE LIMINAL CITY

London is a city of concrete reality built over mythic musings. It is constructed of layers and ruins, each piled upon another. These layers and ruins are only half erased, still preserved in old maps, long-lost alleyways and projected, but never to be built, buildings. London is a palimpsest of histories and peoples murmuring through dust. In the ruins and voids that mark its geography are to be found the liminal spaces which reveal a city of imagination spaces too, joined by a thread to the concrete and reality of urban daily life, where literature, film, Spiritualism, the occult, theatre and the Internet recreate a meta-city of endless rain, darkness, hauntings, spectres, temples and revenants; a city of dead memories which will not, and cannot be laid to rest, drawing the wanderer back into the Victorian gaslight of Piccadilly or the opium dens of Limehouse Basin and the asylum silently waiting in the suburbs of Denmark Hill.

This liminal city may be traversed by wanderers at night or in the fog, by psychogeographers and hauntologists in search of the half-revealed fluctuations between reality and dreams, between streets long forgotten or streets recently walked, where mystery lies in psychological projection down alleyways or tunnels, and where hallucination or the undead past or the repressed are hidden until the ritual words are spoken in the incense-filled temple down a backstreet in Hammersmith (now merely a café with a secret past).

The London wanderer walks alone with their secrets, walks silently with the hidden past, suddenly revealed in visions and psychosis. Revelations await in silent nooks and forgotten places, lost in time. The London rambler passes through a visionary landscape of images and actions long lost to others, but silently buried awaiting resurrection in hectic dreams. Who is the wanderer, if not us with our eyes shut to the everyday and open to the occult possibilities of the invisible? Underneath the metropolitan noise London is a 'thin' place where even the daily commute might discover troglodytes in the Underground, or 'Cenobites' in suburban Dollis Hill and where mysteries are again celebrated in Roman temples hidden deep beneath the skyscrapers of modernity.

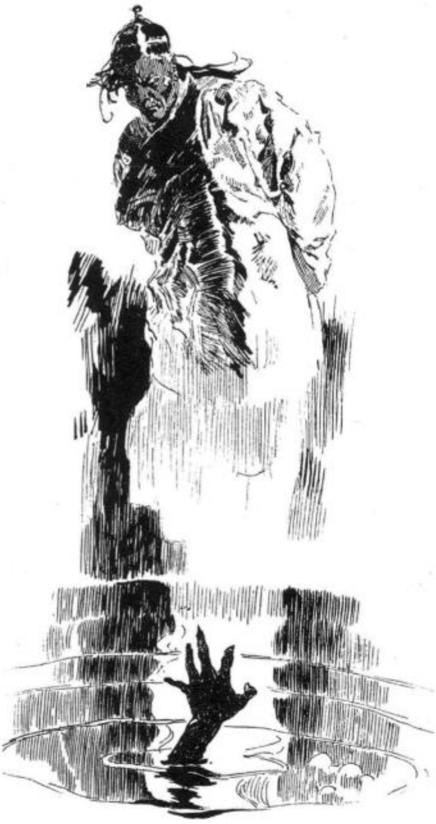
CHRONICLE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: A lantern slide showing the Thames and Cleopatra's Needle, where Aleister Crowley once held a party, in 1910. **BELOW:** One of JC Coll's many beautiful illustrations for the *Collier's Magazine* appearances of Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu stories from 1913 onwards.

MYRIAD MAPS

The metropolis has always presented a disjunction between the physicality of urban living and the psychological disturbance of alienation and distraction. The city is a palimpsest of lost stories and lost lives, of hauntings and returns, a place of *pied-*à*-terre* table rappers and down-at-heel fortune tellers who mingle with night club occultists and Darwinian monsters played out in the imagination of hack writers and sensationalist journalists. It is where Emanuel Swedenborg met God eating in a coffee shop, where Rabbi Falk could interpret The Kabbalah in Wellclose Square, where Arthur Machen could walk along the Gray's Inn Road or Stoke Newington and be in two dimensions at the same time, where Aleister Crowley could hold a street party under Cleopatra's Needle and keep a skeleton in Chancery Lane and where the Theosophist Mabel Collins could write her books under the instruction of troops of ancient Egyptians parading into her flat near the Embankment.

London is not only a city, but a myriad map in which imaginative play may recreate Heaven or Hell in a backstreet. Ghosts exist in the spaces between physical structures. There are shapes and ideas in the shadows from which imagination may fashion a Dr Jekyll or Mr Hyde, conjure demons or buy the garments of ancient Egyptian gods in the Strand for rituals at the Albert Hall. London, through our imaginations, has become weird and uncanny, a city lost in fog and blind alleys, a place to conjure up the spirits of the long dead.



Underneath this occultism and spirituality lay forgotten layers of bedsit tarot readings, Egyptian rituals in dusty halls, meetings with ancient mummies in the British Museum, magicians in Notting Hill, strange rituals to raise demons near Holborn or the walking dead in unfashionable Hackney. Memories of occult organisations and magical practices mix with Christian festivals of the afterlife celebrated with hymns in Gower Street, while in the apartments of Bloomsbury's Bohemia, mediums floated across rooms after the cigars and brandy, and in the 'Magnificent Seven' Victorians paraded around garden cemeteries and buried their dead in serried loculi ready to visit on a damp afternoon. Yet, there was more: a Croydon woman claimed she had been bitten by a 'vampire'. Objects were no longer to be trusted, as crockery and cutlery swirled about kitchens from Bromley to Enfield; Ilford, now in the London Borough of Redbridge, became the birth place of Kenneth Grant, whose New Isis Lodge would meet in Baker Street to discuss the realities hidden in *The Necronomicon*, HP Lovecraft's fictional manual of pulp science fiction supernaturalism; the Elephant and Castle was the scene of the hallucinatory spirit drawings of Osman Austin Spare and Grand Guignol theatre of Tod Slaughter.

There was some terrible revelation coming too, some apocalyptic event about to occur. It was doom, the fall of empire, the rise of women and of labour, the shriek of bombs, and finally a sort of death, and rebirth as vampire, zombie or lycanthrope. Science confronted the continuance of London even as the dead were being raised in suburban houses with prayers and hallelujahs. Whether it was the new research into

JULIAN OSLEY / CREATIVE COMMONS

ABOVE: The Egyptian Gates at Abney Park Cemetery, Stoke Newington: possible portal to Arthur Machen's Elysium in the short story 'N'.

archæology, ethnology, biology or evolution, science had doomed the great metropolis: somewhere in polite society was hatching a dreadful plot to revive a mummy in Richard Marsh's *The Beetle* (1897) or perhaps a terrible gangrenous purple fog was drifting across the face of the Moon, annihilating London, in Shiel's apocalyptic *The Purple Cloud* (1901); Richard Jefferies' *After London* (1885) burst the Thames, which drowned the city in effluent, and Martians roamed from Woking to the East End in HG Wells's *War of the Worlds* (1897); and there is always the East End, a forbidden other to its twin in the West, where the hands of the Ripper and the teeth of Dracula had gone before and where Dr Fu Manchu conspires in his opium den.

We might explore the streets and alleys of London under candlelight, gaslight and neon to peer into the ghostly windows of houses long demolished and tales long forgotten. This is a London that is made of bricks and mortar and of imagination, of high-rise blocks and semi-detached red bricks, but also of lost pathways, practices and tastes only to be found in dusty books, popular literature, film, television, fashion, video games and now online media.

Fact and fiction have created a hallucinatory London of imagination and psychological trauma in which fantasy and geography merge. The Gothic is the study of derangement, hallucination, ruins and death, placed within an imaginary world of the strange and distorted. It is a landscape that beckons us from the night world of 'Satanic' Cheapside to the opium bought in Oxford Street by Romantic dreamers such as Thomas De Quincey and consumed in Soho, and it stretches to the fog-filled world of 19th-century sexuality and murder, to the imperial realm of aliens and creeping terrors, and finally to the horror films of Hammer and Amicus in which London becomes the *mise en scene* for every urban dislocation.

This London is unstable, weird, uncanny, not *dead* like Bruges or Brussels or Prague, but crawling with lunacy, hallucination, Satanic conjurations, occult incantations and ghostly presences. It is a London that is both a waking reality and a creation of dreams. Literature, film, television and social media have continuously re-written London as *London*, a fictionalised space in which dreams and nightmares mix. Newsmen, mystics, outsider artists, occultists and those in social media, as well the homeless and the sex worker, might at any time have seen London as vibrant, because terrifying and unreal.

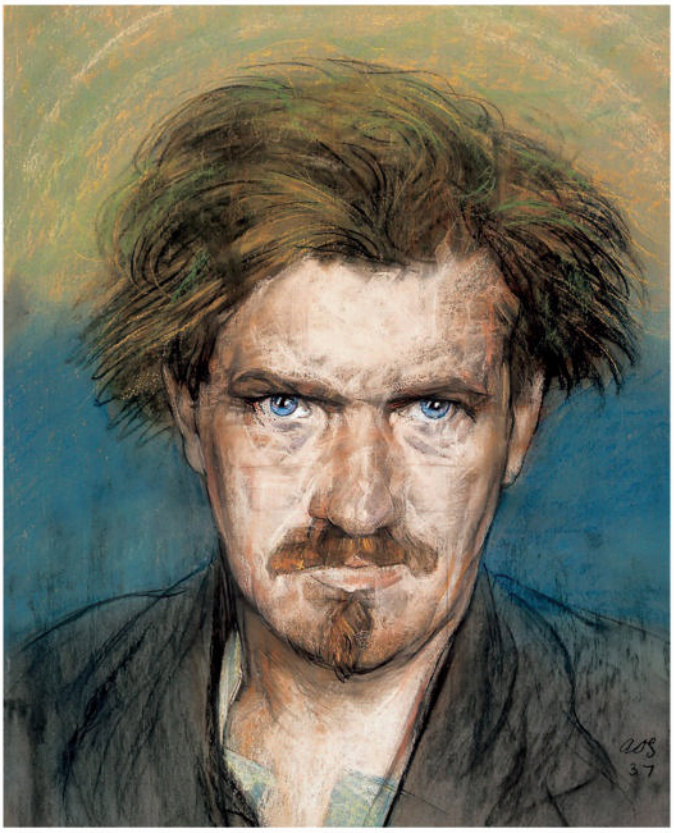
The lack of a pattern to London life is explored in a rudimentary way by Dickens's friend George WM Reynolds in his serial *The Mysteries of London (1844)*. Reynolds begins his narrative with a speculation on the division of wealth in London. Reynolds finds 'vice' at all levels of society, from the brothel to the palace itself. If London has no moral conscience, because no belief in a cosmic order based in Christianity, if everyone is simply out for themselves, then the whole is riddled with degeneracy and that breakdown of social order creates the modern Babylon. The divide between 'poverty' and 'wealth' is crime. Crime is uncanny because it produces the constant of forces which cannot be controlled, which seem to come out of nowhere and by doing so remove the victim from cosy oblivion to a traumatic displacement where reality has shifted into nightmare.

Criminality exists at the heart of metropolitan life, a sign of degeneracy; violence is endemic and vice universal. There is no explanation, no pattern to vice and crime. Religion no longer comforts the poor or the rich. What remains is chaos and the random encounter. Which brings us to the realm of the uncanny, weird, strange and eerie – synonyms for the inexplicable.

OUTSIDERS AND GHOSTS

The uncanny moment is the moment of unexpected encounter with doppelgängers, ghosts, spectres, poltergeist activity and the demonic, but also with bumping into significant others, insanity, aliens and strangers who 'know' us without our knowing why. "Life's strange isn't it?" says a character in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*. The uncanny is a disturbance in the cosmic order through which we dimly perceive the presence of random vacuity. It exposes no patterns and yet no meanings either. It is a feeling of abandonment in the face of cosmic disinterest in our fate. The uncanny is a random event loaded with apparent significance, a confrontation with existence in which existence ceases to have a meaning. The feeling can come to the godless or the religiously obsessed, who suddenly lose their faith.

Colin Wilson in his study of existential



ARTEPICS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

RGR COLLECTION / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE LEFT: South London artist and occultist Austin Osmond Spare. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Tod Slaughter, Grand Guignol star of stage and screen.

anguish, *The Outsider* (1956), written after a period when he was down on his luck in north London, offers this analogy: that outsider figures suffer from "the unreality of their lives". The freedom of the person exposed to this abyss of the simulacra is the freedom of seeing the truth for what it is, either becoming an Emmanuel Swedenborg or William Blake and surviving in parallel universes, or becoming insane like the painter Richard Dadd, having stabbed his father on Hampstead Heath, or immersing yourself in the insanity of other people's schizophrenic breakdowns as R D Laing did at the Tavistock Clinic and at Kingsley Hall.

In William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) there is a sudden loss of perspective in an unexpected encounter with an inmate of an asylum:

"Whilst in a state of philosophic pessimism, and general depression of spirits about my prospects, I went one evening into a dressing-room in the twilight… when suddenly there came upon me, without any warning, just as if it came out of the darkness, a horrible fear of my own existence. Simultaneously, there arose in my mind the image of an epileptic patient I had seen in the asylum, a black-haired youth with greenish skin, entirely idiotic, who used to sit all day… moving nothing but his black eyes, and looking absolutely non-human. This image and my fear entered into a species of combination with each other. *That shape am I,* I felt, potentially."

The years from the 1870s to the First World War were riddled with such anxieties. They are explored in the plethora of strange London-based characters that mark its literature: Robert Louis Stevenson's Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, where one character inhabits the world of medical science in Cavendish Square and the other lives in a fogbound and seedy house in Soho; Bram Stoker's Count Dracula keeping his boxes of Transylvanian soil fresh in Chicksand Street, off Brick Lane, an area originally made uncanny by the presence of its Eastern European inhabitants; HG Wells's Invisible Man rampant in Gower Street and Tavistock Square; Arthur Machen's Helen Vaughan in her apartment in Piccadilly; Arthur Conan Doyle's Professor Moriarty planning his criminal empire in a London Club; Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray contemplating his portrait; Richard Marsh's Egyptian cults in the terraces of Hammersmith in *The Beetle*; Sax Rohmer's Dr Fu Manchu in his opium den in Limehouse, and many others.

Is anything more convincing regarding encounters with the inexplicable than the rise of the British ghost tale? Indeed, by Edwardian times ghosts were seen as part of an intrinsically English landscape. The Reverend PH Ditchfield, in his *The Charm of the English Village* (1908), enthused that "[such] ancient traditions, ghosts and legends, add greatly to the charm of our old houses"; for Ditchfield, ghosts, like ducking stools, lych gates and inglenook fireplaces, form part of the fabric of old England, now itself becoming spectral in the twilight before the Great War. No potential buyer of a rural manor should overlook the charm of having a resident ghost.

As he lay dying, John Keats penned a letter to a friend in which he imagines that "[he] had died already and [was] living a posthumous existence". Keats is in limbo, awaiting his own demise, a ghostly, fading presence. Ghost stories are about uncanny encounters, random experiences and (for the reader) anticipated endings that cannot be explained but must be endured and reported. They touch the void, they suggest chaos. Only the outsider, a romantic explorer of inner psychic states, may perceive the truth concealed in the place of 'uncertainty' where the 'healthy' person, wrapped up in quotidian reality, never looks. The 'outsider' sees "too deep and too much", as Henri Barbusse argued. Modern London, concrete and all, remains uncanny and still beckons to its brave psychogeographers walking a path between reality and dreams.

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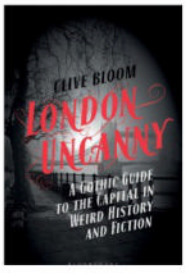
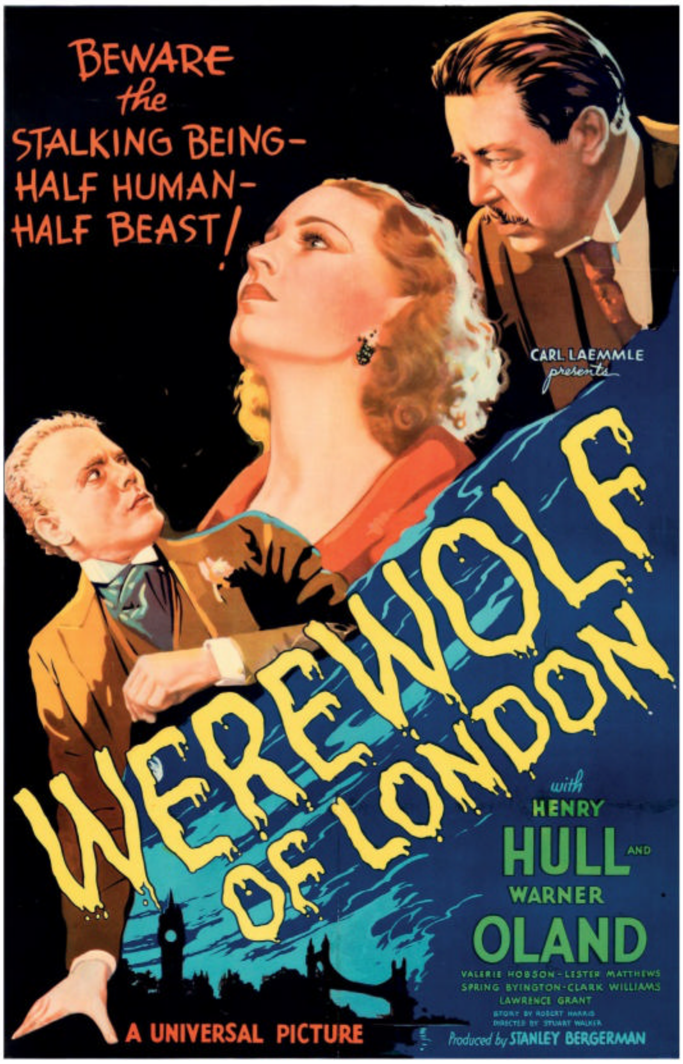


London Uncanny: A Gothic Guide to the Capital in Weird History and Fiction **by Clive Bloom is published by Bloomsbury Academic, RRP £20.**

The Mark of the Wolf

On the 90th anniversary of its release, **EDWARD PARNELL** celebrates the first Hollywood feature film to deal with lycanthropy: 1935's *Werewolf of London.*



LEFT AND BELOW: Henry Hull played an English botanist who is transformed into a werewolf sporting an ever-encroaching widow's peak. **FACING PAGE**: Lon Chaney Jr made more of an impression six years later in Universal's next foray into lycanthropy, *The Wolf Man*.

Hollywood's first effort at tackling the folklore of lycanthropy came in a short 1913 silent flick, *The Werewolf*, about a Navajo woman who turns into a vengeful wolf; it's impossible today to judge how effectively it captured the switch from woman to beast as the print was destroyed in a 1924 fire, though contemporary accounts state that the defining scene consisted of a straightforward dissolve between the two shots.

Although not werewolves per se, supernaturally-infused wolves – well, their sounds, at least, as we never see the animals that make them – feature memorably in Tod Browning's 1931 adaptation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, a film I watched as soon as I could tape it off late-night television; it was to be a few more years, just into my teens, that I first read the novel, a paperback copy borrowed from my brother's book shelves, in which it's revealed the vampire can summon wolves, owls, bats, moths and foxes as his familiars – an ability that causes a previously well-behaved Norwegian wolf named Bersicker to escape from London Zoo. The Count even has the power to transform himself into lupine form, as when his Russian schooner, the *Demeter*, arrives at Whitby and the only creature seen to leave the vessel is a "great dog" that may have "made its way on to the moors".

However, there's one scene in Browning's atmosphere-laden picture that eclipses my recollections of the novel: the meeting that occurs on the decrepit cobweb-covered staircase as Bela Lugosi's Dracula introduces himself to the wide-eyed Renfield (sent to Transylvania in place of the novel's Jonathan Harker), shortly after the young solicitor has first entered the shadows of the Count's Carpathian castle. The drawn-out cry of a wolf sounding through the vast cathedral-like window brings Renfield's ascent to a halt.

"Listen to them," says Lugosi in his mellifluous Hungarian accent, "Children of the night. What music they make!"

The first attempt to tackle the werewolf myth in the era of the talkie came with Universal Pictures' *Werewolf of London* (1935). In my original viewing this was most memorable for the brief, but startling, appearance of the giant octopoid, frog-consuming "Madagascar Carnalia" flower, which looks like it should've been the inspiration for the carnivorous man-eating plant Audrey in *Little Shop of Horrors*, or for John Wyndham's triffids. This was to be the penultimate film as a director for Stuart Walker, with Henry Hull taking the lead role of Dr Wilfred Glendon, a renowned English botanist. Glendon visits Tibet on a plant-finding expedition to find the rare wolf-flower. Although successful, in the course of his quest he is attacked and bitten by a strange creature that's later revealed as rival botanist Dr Yogami in a transformed lupine state. Yogami is a chimeric figure with a Japanese-sounding name, though he was played by the Swedish actor Warner Oland. The character also happens to work at the University of Carpathia – surely Dracula's favoured institute of higher education! Given the

technical limitations of the era, *Werewolf of London*'s metamorphoses are cleverly done: Glendon's cursed face gradually acquires more facial hair and, oddly, an ever-encroaching widow's peak each time he passes out of the shadows as we first witness him changing.

My adolescent forays into the werewolves of the big screen left, I'm sure, little impression on me as to how the wolf can also be representative of the beast inside man – of the horrors lurking in the recesses of our subconscious minds. This is a key theme of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, though in that 1886 novella science and a potion is responsible for the transformation rather than an infectious bite and the luminous power of the Moon. *Werewolf of London*, on the face of things, is deceptively tame. Its script, which was adapted by the gay playwright and screenwriter John Colton, possesses its own subtext – about repressed homosexual desires and their associated feelings of shame. According to the film's Dr Yogami: "The werewolf is neither man nor wolf, but a Satanic creature with the worst qualities of both." Its dark urges can only be held at bay, Yogami says, as he stands in close proximity to his fellow accursed botanist, lingeringly touching the sleeve concealing the Englishman's bite, by the fabled Tibetan "*Mariphasa lumina lupina* – the phosphorescent wolf-flower – why, you know, it blooms only under the rays of the Moon."

Later, we watch Glendon desperately trying to squeeze juice from the stem of the *Mariphasa* into a vein in his arm, in the hope of "curing" his condition. Although the carnal, bestial desires on display in *Werewolf in London* are much less explicit and far more coded than those of John Landis's similarly titled 1981 movie – a film that contains several nods to its predecessor, most memorably the scene where its protagonist David Kessler wakes up naked in the wolf enclosure at London Zoo – they're also more poignant. As we're told: "The werewolf instinctively seeks to kill the thing it loves the best."

"The werewolf instinctively seeks to kill the thing it loves the best"

Werewolf of London did not make much impact on cinema audiences at the time, despite its beguiling oddness – the studio's decision to release it a week after James Whale's seminal *Bride of Frankenstein* (which also starred Valerie Hobson, who played Glendon's frustrated wife in *Werewolf of London*) didn't help – and film-goers of the day had to wait another six years for a better remembered, though arguably less satisfactory take on the man-becomes-wolf tale.

Several of what we now expect as the vital ingredients of werewolf lore stem from Universal's second stab at the genre, *The Wolf Man* (1941), in which Lon Chaney Jr was transformed by hours in the make-up chair and a mountain of yak hair into the iconic monster. *The Wolf Man* is set in the fictional Welsh village (or town – even the cast can't seem to decide which) of Llanwelly, though as far as I can tell the first mention of the place name comes at the opening of the ridiculous sequel, *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man* (1943); certainly, the audience would have been hard-pressed to guess that Wales was the location based on any visual clues in the film, or from any of the actors' voices.

The Wolf Man begins with Lon Chaney Jr returning to his ancestral Castle Talbot after an 18-year absence in the States, where he presumably acquired his US accent – though given his childhood friend, the local Chief Constable, also has a broad American drawl, it doesn't necessarily signify. Larry Talbot is a naïve, hulking figure, reminiscent of Lennie in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* and, although amiable enough, there's not a great deal to his character. The film's most interesting role belongs to Sir John Talbot, Larry's father, who refuses to countenance what his son is becoming despite the increasing evidence. The part is played perfectly by Claude Rains, already a star from his own classic 1933 horror movie, *The Invisible Man*, and who 12 months after *The Wolf Man* was to walk out of shot in the final frame of *Casablanca* as Humphrey Bogart addresses him with one of cinema's most-famous last lines: "Louis – I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

The Wolf Man is let down by its pedestrian scares, with the transformed Chaney singularly tame-looking – a sort of grumpy, oversized ewok with an underbite; stills of the monster's made-up face are far-more effective than the beast in action, as watching Chaney step daintily on the balls of his feet, while still sporting his trousers and shirt, is more ridiculous than menacing. What the film does well is atmosphere, with beautifully lit, fog-filled nocturnal scenes. A recurring poem alludes to wolfbane's function in the transformation – perhaps a nod to the role flowers play in the earlier *Werewolf of London*:

"Even a man who is pure in heart, and says his prayers by night
May become a wolf when the wolfbane blooms
And the autumn moon is bright."

The Wolfman also gives us a creepy fortune-telling gypsy played by Bela Lugosi, and fantastically designed backdrops, as well as introducing some of the now expected on-screen lycanthropic elements: like the requirement to employ a silver bullet (or, in Lon Chaney Jr's case, a silver walking stick) to dispatch the beast, and the use of the five-pointed pentagram – "the sign of the werewolf". This is the same symbol daubed in red paint on the wall of The Slaughtered Lamb in Landis's partly Welsh-filmed *An American Werewolf in London* – though my introduction to it (on a rental VHS, circa 1984) as a terrified 10-year-old is a story for another full moonlit night…

EDWARD PARNELL is the author of *Ghostland: In Search of a Haunted Country* (2019) and recently edited *Eerie East Anglia: Fearful Tales of Field and Fen* (2024), an anthology of classic ghost stories.

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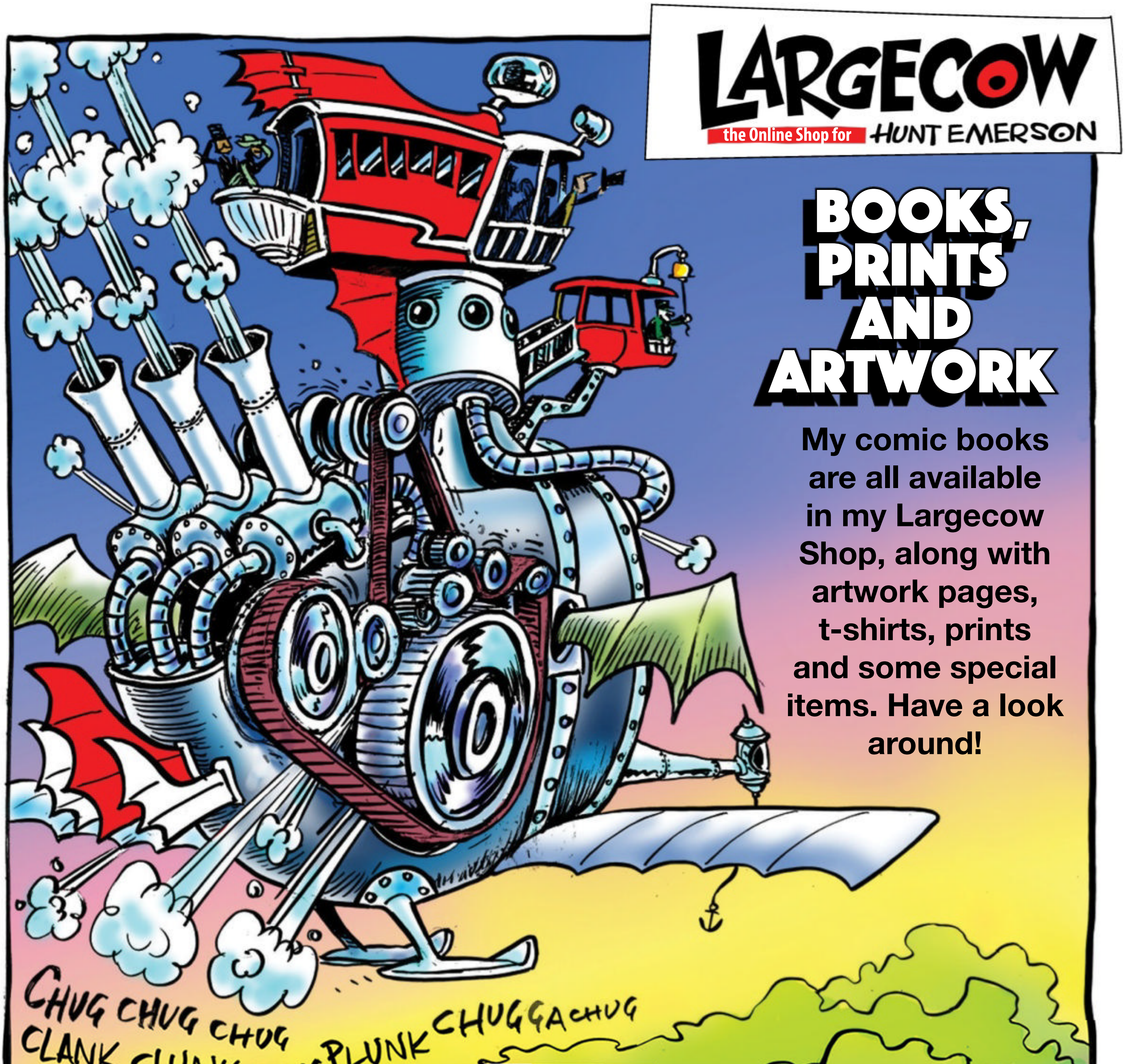
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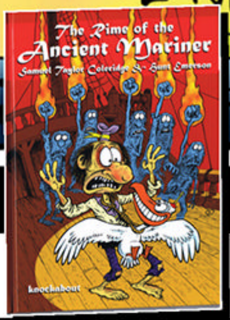
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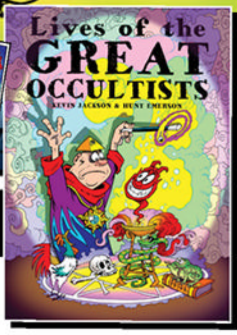
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The weirdest of the weird

Headless horrors, monstrous miasmas and hounds from hell – amongst many others – show that we shouldn't limit any claim, however initially outlandish, from potential consideration, says **Alan Murdie**

The Highest Strangeness

Richard Freeman

CFZ Press 2024

Pb, 430pp, £15.99, ISBN 9781909488724

There's probably quite a sizeable list of people to whom this interesting and entertaining book should not be recommended: hyper-sensitive individuals, anxiety-prone bureaucrats who draw up trigger-warnings for university students and timid souls who crave a world that is humdrum, ordinary and predictable, should steer clear.

Within this book Richard Freeman features his choice of reports and novel stories that should be given the "weirdest of the weird" status in the paranormal and forteana. An active cryptozoologist and inveterate traveller, he provides here what in an earlier age would be a fine collection of travellers' tales and seafarers' yarns, a fast-moving text examining what he terms the highest strangest cases gleaned from diverse sources including alleged factual accounts, historical records, folklore and rumour with a sprinkling of first-hand witness testimony including some intriguing experiences of his own.

Chapter one takes in monsters, synthesising dragons, camel-like creatures near Loch Ness, sea serpents, apes from space, wolf-men and sightings of Britain's answer to Bigfoot.

Chapter two looks into racketing ghosts in an initially chronological survey beginning with the 1661 Demon Drummer of Tedworth, the 1716 Wesley Poltergeist at Epworth Rectory, the swinish horror of Gyb Farm and a selection of poltergeist outbreaks featuring animal phantoms, including one with a giant beetle! This increasingly queasy collection of spectres soon diversifies to encompass headless horrors, monstrous miasmas and hounds from Hell. Road ghosts and even ghost trees get a mention before localising some such as the Ruskington Horror.

Chapter three takes off with cases of ufological weirdness, it soon becoming apparent that as with the enormous variety of shapes of alleged and reported alien craft, their presumed occupants are likewise all things to all people including extraterrestrial "Kermits", hairy dwarfs, insectoid aliens, octopuses, space birds, wrinkled horrors like "the mummies of Pascagoula" and hideous "brain beasts".

THE HIGHEST STRANGENESS
Richard Freeman

Freeman dives into what may loosely be termed "other entities" – fairies, goblins, trolls, bedroom invaders, vampiric beings – supplying a personal experience of being pixy-led in Dartmoor in 2000.

There is also a first-hand account from someone who claims to have seen one entity rip its skin off its own face leaving just raw flesh, like something out of Clive Barker's *Hellraiser* series. Such lurid terrors and experiences propel Freeman towards older, indigenous motifs such as the Canadian First Nation traditions of the Wendigo – belief in which provoked at least one homicide in 1894 and probably others – alongside British accounts of Spring-heeled Jack, invisible childhood friends and talking animals, of which Gef the Talking Mongoose is clearly a special favourite.

> *Someone claims to have seen one entity rip its skin off its own face leaving just raw flesh*

The final chapter has the unrestrained but to a degree justified title, "What the hell is going on?"

I cannot say I am convinced of the objective truth or reality of much of the material included. Rather than seeing patterns, many researchers – whether open to the existence of such phenomena or not – will see nothing but an amorphous collection of historical facts, sources, textual references and hearsay. These are phenomena where the quoted facts stubbornly refuse to "speak for themselves" owing to their randomness and complete refusal to come to order. Inconveniently, with the vast majority of anomalous reports we are saddled with only fallible human memories and interpretations from a long time ago, and a lasting ambiguity as regards any physical traces discoverable afterwards.

A fair wedge of the material is probably more of psychological than paranormal interest. Even assuming unequivocal observations to support some of them, in which branch of science should we accommodate them? For example, should we categorise anomalous lights in geology, atmospherics, plasma physics, electromagnetism or astronomy? Others are probably products of pure rumour or press inventions, and one hopes some are not true. Others probably need sociologists or mythologists to unravel them. But this diverse collection is welcome in being presented by an actual field worker, one refreshingly free of the theoretical reservations typically inhibiting more cloistered and desk-bound scholars and analysts whose technical assessments may reduce even the most extraordinary material to turgidity.

Freeman tentatively speculates that some of the strangest entity reports not ascribable to subjective hallucinations, misperception or drugs may involve unknown physical creatures whilst others represent either mental projections or thought forms, or manifestations of a universal "monster template" existing on some archetypal or Platonic level, outside recognised material reality.

Whatever the case, he is effectively making two pleas. Firstly, not to limit any claim, however initially outlandish, from potential consideration; and secondly, to appreciate that the monotonous debate over the realities or otherwise is far too narrow ever to resolve these questions or furnish satisfactory answers.

With this collection I wished for more detail on particular sources – I understand the absence was a publication restriction – but otherwise if you like your dose of wonders to come fast-paced and stimulating, this book is eminently suitable, whatever one's final verdict may veer towards.

★★★★

Folkloric perambulation

Paula Dempsey enjoys the folk art of an outstanding chronicler of the nation's customs

Folklore Rising

An Artist's Journey Through the Ritual Year

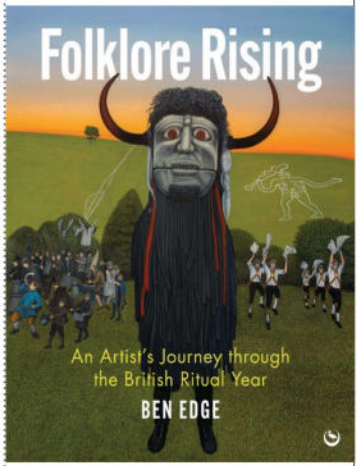
Ben Edge

Watkins Publishing 2024

Hb, 256pp, £25, ISBN 9781786788740

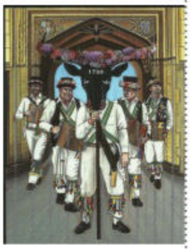
A chance encounter with a group of Druids outside the Tower of London became life-changing for artist Ben Edge. Curiosity about their seasonal procession eventually led to his decision to take a gamble on painting for a living. He is now a well-known chronicler of the nation's customs at a time when public interest in folklore is greater than it has been in, arguably, a century.

The book follows Edge's perambulation around the UK to research and document the calendar year of customs and traditions.

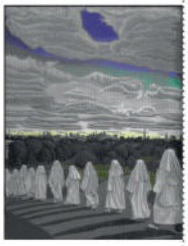


Each custom is illustrated with one of his paintings with the accompanying text detailing his visit to see the custom enacted and the process of creating a picture; how he weighs the associated legends and images to decide what to include in the painting. There are many photographs, too, which capture the immediacy and often the chaos of each event.

Edge's paintings don't pin down a moment in time but tell a story. Background details in the pictures illustrate legends and origin stories associated with the folk custom depicted in the foreground. These are visual stories. Look carefully and there are clues to the evolution of the custom over time, but the images are sited very much in the now. There is no misplaced nostalgia for Merrie England here. The Burryman of Queensferry is painted in front of some unremarkable terraced houses. Participants in ancient customs gather outside Superdrug.



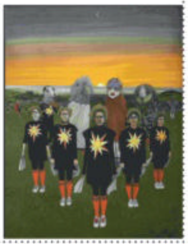
Many books on folklore document customs in a way that makes them seem unchangeable – this is how it is done and how it has always been done – an approach that folklorist Doc Rowe described as "the butterfly and the pin".



Edge shows that folklore is mutable and it's the shifting nature of customs and traditions that keep them relevant in the 21st century. That a custom has relevance, that it functions to reinforce the bonds of a community, is far more important than how old the custom is, and tradition should be no barrier to diversity.

This book is really about people. About what is important to them and what reinforces their sense of community. I hope it captures the first years of a new and vigorous phase in British folklore.

If you want to explore folklore for yourself, *Folklore Rising* is an excellent place to start.



★★★★★

An Anthology of American Strangeness

Vol 1. Thunderbirds, Lost Temples and Skeleton Ghosts

Kevin J Guhl

Kevin J Guhl 2024

Pb, 496pp, £15.32, ISBN 9798218528317

Most of these accounts are of monsters that entertained the readers of the American press in the late 19th century. This was a time when bored reporters turned their skills to inventing lurid encounters with huge man-eating birds, thunderbirds, dragons, sea monsters, ghostly skeletons and devilish creatures.

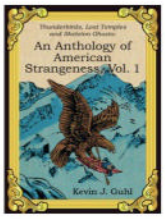
Rather than simply recounting these stories Guhl puts them in their historical context and digs up plenty of people and facts behind the newspaper headlines. The most fascinating character is the Rev Reuben Allender Berson who after being a notorious bigamist in England and Europe, relocated to the USA in the 1880s. Posing as Dr Archibald Richard and under various other aliases he duped landlords, merchants, professors and church leaders with promises of setting up educational establishments. These never lasted long, and he went on to other schemes to sell miracle drugs – and then he promoted the idea the world was going to end in six months' time. If his followers gave him one-tenth of their savings they would go with him to the Promised Land. His biggest coup was to declare he had found an ancient Aztec city under El Paso, but as with his other claims it never came up with the promised treasure.

An equally fascinating character is Lewis Van Dercar, a Miami artist and warlock. In the early 1960s he claimed he was possessed during WWII by an alien from Metores named Jeb, and advertised the sale of the eggs of legendary and monstrous Roc birds.

Dercar's Roc eggs echo the reports of giant birds seen in the 1890s, one example being the testimony of the young son of Judge Dillar who saw "an enormous creature flying through the air with bat-like wings. A long bill and a tail twisted like a doughnut" in City Park, Arizona.

A heady mixture of outright advertising, as in the case of the Hodag beast invented by the Centralia Lumber Co, hoaxes like the Montana UFO crash of 1865, supernatural yarns often fuelled by indigenous legends, misconceptions and natural phenomena, as in the case of the Illinois cloud man, all ignite into existence the abundance of American strangeness. These events and stories recorded in black-and-white print are often blips in the lives of real people and through Guhl's meticulous and sympathetic research he helps breathe life into their life and times.

Guhl does not attempt to prove the literal reality of Bigfoot, sky serpents, the Jersey Devil or the other entities in this volume; instead he acknowledges we live with paradox. As he notes, in our scientifically sanitised world "there's a part of our consciousness that perceives something inexplicable beneath the veil of hard reality".


Thunderbirds, Lost Temples and Skeleton Ghosts
An Anthology of American Strangeness Vol. 1
Kevin J. Guhl

Each chapter is provided with sources, and altogether this is an exemplary exploration of tales that still resonate with us today.

Nigel Watson

★★★★★

The Shape of Things Unseen

A New Science of Imagination

Adam Zeman

Bloomsbury 2025

Hb, 384pp, £25, ISBN 9781526609731

A few months ago FT founder Bob Rickard reviewed another fascinating, challenging book on the imagination. *How to Think Impossibly*, by the American philosopher Jeffrey Kripal, made a provocative case for the "imaginal" as the way that our brains tune into and interpret a hidden paranormal reality.

Adam Zeman is both a philosopher and a neurologist. This book is the perfect counterweight to Kripal's, grounded in up-to-date hard science and peer-reviewed medical studies. I read the two back-to-back, comparing their contrasting approaches to the same phenomena.

Zeman keeps both feet in consensus material reality, yet he still manages to foster a deep sense of wonder. He shares with

Kripal the fundamental belief that the imagination is an essential part of what makes us human. His central argument is that everyday perception is a constant effort by the brain to predict the world around us. These predictions can sometimes override the actual sensory information provided by our eyes and ears, leading to errors in interpretation, even superimposed hallucinations. Despite these glitches, being able to imagine is what sets us apart from most animals; it's given us the ability to manage complex societies and to manipulate our environment (if not always for the best).

THE SHAPE OF THINGS UNSEEN
A NEW SCIENCE OF IMAGINATION
Adam Zeman

Zeman retreads the latest theories on how humanity, and our imagination, may have evolved – if you know your australopithecines as well as your astral projectionings (ahem), you may wish to skim through.

The second half is better. Zeman speaks to cases from his clinical practice; the diagnosis and often successful treatment of individuals suffering from various malfunctions of the imagination. Capgras syndrome (the feeling a loved one has been replaced by an imposter) and Charles Bonnet's syndrome (visual hallucinations in the blind) will be familiar to FT readers.

He also highlights the wide variation among otherwise healthy people: one in 10 of us will "hear" voices, at least occasionally. At the other end of the spectrum four per cent are aphantasic, unable to bring mental imagery to the mind's eye. This has proven no disability in the case of senior Pixar animator Ed Catmull, who rose to the top of his profession.

Reading Zeman, it's tempting to consign several fortean phenomena to the bin, especially those that strike when the brain is resting, distracted or at the edge of sleep, for he provides such a compelling worldview grounded in biology that might explain where these anomalous experiences come from.

Instead, I found myself reaching back to Kripal, for a little doubt and re-enchantment, because perhaps the real truth lies in a middle space I imagine between these two works.

Ryan Shirlow

★★★★

Otherworld

Nine Tales of Wonder and Romance from Mediæval Ireland

Lisa M Bitel

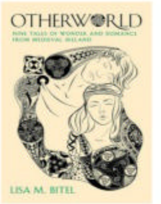
Oxford University Press 2025

Hb, 248pp, £20, ISBN 9780197600610

This rich retelling of nine Irish myths in new translations by Lisa M Bitel, and elegant illustrations by Saba Joshaghani, tell of the dangers of falling in love with creatures from the Irish Otherworld and the wars that are waged to prove the worthiness to win shape-shifting heroines. In this world of wonder, love is "fickle, fragile and fraught".

Although tales of sex, violence and magic might seem rather juicy material for learned religious men, these stories have only survived because mediæval chroniclers recognised some importance contained within, committing them to valuable vellum.

Irish mythology is a complex beast and difficult to pin down, as stories have been pieced together and rebuilt from surviving fragments. Words seem to be living things, constantly shifting and morphing, much like the hero who transforms into a blood-enraged warrior due to a "warp spasm" or the bird women who turn into swans.



Tales prove fluid as plots entwine and overlap, and leading characters pop up in cameo roles in other narratives. The stories themselves hint at possibilities, speak of other versions, reference their obscurity and their fragmentary nature. However, it is important to remember that these interrelated stories would have originally been familiar to their listeners who could have predicted and anticipated story-lines by knowing characters' back stories rather like a mediæval soap opera.

Bitel's authorial voice breaks into the narrative throughout, commenting on characters or the fact that two stories appear joined together. In other hands this could be distracting but her deft prose makes the story action come alive. She combines lyricism with accessibility. The tales reward a slow and careful read to appreciate the vivid imagery and richness of language. Poems are peppered throughout, pausing the action to reveal hidden thoughts and desires, as Bitel winningly phrases it "like a show tune erupting in a Broadway musical"!

In these tales of bravery and boldness, in which heroes play hurley with human heads, women are surprisingly and refreshingly part of the bawdy action, holding pissing competitions (the winner has her eyes plucked out by the jealous competitors). Their conflicts and triumphs are front and centre as much as their male counterparts.

This book proves a great primer in Irish mythology as we are introduced to many of the main players. A family tree-type guide to characters might have been helpful as would a pronunciation guide for non-Irish speakers.

Bitel tells us: "The teller shapes the tale and the tale returns the favour," and "Everyone is a fool for an amusing story of love and wonder." It's true.

Olivia Armstrong

★★★★

Victorian and Early 20th Century Baby Farming

The Darkest Business

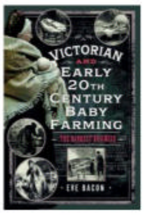
Eve Bacon

Pen & Sword History 2024

Hb, 226pp, £25, ISBN 9781036110567

As a culture we seem to have an inexhaustible appetite for dark tales of the Victorian era, and baby farming is ideal fare. Baby farming was the practice of handing over custody of a child to someone else in exchange for payment and was commonly associated with unmarried mothers hiding illegitimate children. As the term "farming" implies, it was not a particularly reputable trade: there were many stories of baby farmers neglecting, or sometimes murdering, their charges in order to pocket the money without the bother of bringing up the child.

This book promises to answer myriad questions, including why baby farming was so prevalent in the 19th century, how police tracked baby farmers down, and how the practice came to an end in the early 20th century. Unfortunately, it does not deliver particularly meaningful answers to these questions. The bulk of the book consists of individual case studies of between one and two pages, which piece together details from contemporary local and national newspapers. It is a relentless catalogue of death and neglect, not helped by Bacon's tendency to offer generalisations that play into the historically simplistic view of the era as one of darkness and suffering.



As a social history of baby farming, then, it is sadly lacking. In answering one of the book's key questions – why there were so many incidents of baby farming in the Victorian era – Bacon allots just seven pages to the topic. Snippets of information that invite further analysis are glossed over or under-explained. That baby farmers regularly moved house conjures up intriguing questions about women's wider use of the anonymous Victorian city, for example, and the Victorian "need for childcare" must surely be linked to an expanding female workforce who found themselves under increasing societal and economic pressure. Legislation such as the 1872 Infant Life Protection Act is presented in a way that suggests such developments happened in a vacuum; the reader will gain little understanding of how social concerns of the era informed the formation of legislation via, for instance, Commons debates or the reforming efforts of groups like the Charity Organisation Society. There is no interrogation of the character of the Victorian periodical and newspaper press, vital when using it as a central source. There is also minimal engagement with relevant secondary literature, and occasional appeal to Wikipedia in place of scholarly sources.

Ultimately the book is a sourcebook rather than an analytical social history. For this reason, it will possibly be helpful for historians seeking examples of baby farming cases without searching the newspaper archives themselves.

Jennifer Wallis

★★

A spider's web of wyrd

Cathi Unsworth explores the latest collection of articles from A Year in the Country and finds fascinating connections of threads

A Year In The Country: Wyrd Explorations

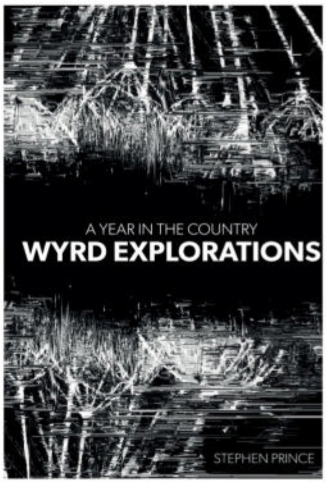
A Decade of Wandering Through Spectral Fields

Stephen Prince

A Year In The Country 2024
Pb, 551pp £19.95 ISBN: 9781916940024

Some are born into weirdness. For Stephen Prince, reading John Wyndham's *Day of The Triffids* as a child was a warning that the "country idyll" of his Peak District village was illusory. "Low flying military planes flew overhead", he recalls, "abandoned pill box defences" littered the fields and "unexploded military ordnance" was often upturned.

Thanks to their parents' occupations, there were also "nuclear air raid warning sirens in the shape of smallish brown Bakelite-style boxes, literally sitting on a shelf and window ledge in the front room where my friend lived and a small office in the forecourt of my house". Such was Eighties life on the Edge of Darkness.



Returning from London to the environs of his childhood a decade ago gave him fresh perspective. Away from the gaze of CCTV, the churn of news, popular culture and omnipresent intrusion of advertising, Prince was inspired to make his own contribution to the artistic manifestations of The Haunted Generation, via his self-produced *A Year In The Country* recordings and books of fiction and non-fiction.

In this compendium of journalistic wanderings, he connects the strands of a spider's web of wyrd that combine the elements of those formative years to catalogue the fresh awakenings of Old Albion from beneath the Military Industrial Complex.

You'll find cinematic and televisual representations from *The Wicker Man* to *Kill List*, *The Owl Service* to *Detectorists*. Music that feeds off such atmospheres – Ghost Box Records, The Eccentronic Research Council and folk music revivalists and revisitors from The Watersons to The Owl Service (the band). Those who made this ground so fertile in the first place – Alan Garner, Nigel Kneale. And those dedicated to saving sacred archive material from landfill – Jonny Trunk, BFI Flipside, Talking Pictures TV.

One connective thread is the retelling of key foundation myths, so that they might mutate and survive through successive generations. My favourite example happens soon after the Thatcher government takes power and is busy denationalising industries, reforming progressive educational policies and selling off council houses.

The young Paul Weller, a copy of Geoffrey Ashe's 1977 book *Camelot and the Vision of Albion* tucked under his arm, goes in the Town House Studio to record "Set The House Ablaze" for The Jam's *Sound Affects* album in June 1980. At the same time, veteran film-maker John Boorman is completing post-production on what he considered his cinematic life's work, *Excalibur* – "an arthouse film cloaked in the trappings of blockbuster spectacle" in which every frame resembles an artwork by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood – for release in April 1981.

Boorman said in his 2003 autobiography, *Adventures of a Suburban Boy*: "The Grail cycle was a metaphor for the past, present and future of humanity." Paul Weller – who, 40 years later, would record the Hauntological EP *In Another Room* for Ghost Box – had come to a similar conclusion, suggesting to *NME* in 1980 that "we had lost sight of our goal as human beings, that material goals had hid the spiritual ones".

Two years before the publication of Ashe's book, the dystopian 1975 BBC children's series *The Changes* depicted the unearthing of a lodestone from a quarry on the Welsh borders triggering a spell cast by Arthur's mentor, Merlin. Having initiated a mass Luddite urge in the UK population to destroy its technological infrastructure, the aim of this Dark Age Working was to "take Britain back to a better, pre-industrial time by psychically inducing the rejection of machinery".

Now Silicon Valley has replaced the Satanic Mills with a different form of mental servitude, the urge to head backwards in time for escape and enlightenment seems never to have been stronger. But, while marking the re-enchantment of our landscape by all these cultural grails, Prince does also ponder on how the very unpopularity of folk culture – pinpointed in Rob Young's pivotal *Electric Eden* (2010) to the dawn of the Thatcher years – may have helped this current crop of fresh and unusual blooms to flower away from "the direct sunlight of media and mass attention".

If the Wyrd can become the televisual province of Charlie Cooper, might "the spirits of wood and stream" again "fall silent", as Nicol Williamson's Merlin warns Helen Mirren's Morgana in *Excalibur*? Prince hopes we shall be able to linger here a while, but his apprehension is understandable.

As Boorman's Magus served to remind us: "It is the way of things."

★★★★★

Pseudoscience

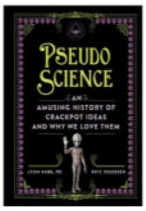
An Amusing History of Crackpot Ideas and Why We Love Them

Lydia Kang & Nate Pedersen

Workman Publishing 2025
Hb, 310pp, £20, ISBN 9781523524259

I wonder if Yoko Ono knew about the "science" of rumpology – divination through the shape of bottoms; the left cheek is the past, the right the future. Invented by Sylvester Stallone's mother, it costs $300 – per cheek!

It's no more daft than palmistry or phrenology – but when the authors also include divination through the fingernails, they should perhaps have added a footnote that doctors can actually tell quite a lot about one's health from the colour of nails. This is one of the many problems with pseudoscience, that very often there is a (usually misunderstood) link to real science.



Kang, a medical professor, and Pedersen are looking for the fun in pseudoscience, and there's plenty to be found. In just the first section they cover flat Earth, spontaneous human combustion, perpetual motion machines and much else. Crop circles certainly aren't made by intoxicated Tasmanian wallabies (a delightful thought); Doug and Dave are given the credit they deserve, though the authors accept there will always be believers in extraterrestrial origins. FT's cryptozoologists may find the entry on cryptozoology too dismissive – but the following one, on the 2012 phenomenon, is spot on.

It's good to see the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator of personality included and, rightly, dismissed – as is the supposed validity of polygraphs (though Scientology's E-meters aren't mentioned).

The well-illustrated book does what it says in the sub-title: it's a fun read. And that's its failing. The one serious entry on climate change denial seems completely out of place. A short Authors' Note says "we acknowledge the existence of deeply harmful pseudoscientific subjects", but they're not fun so they're not covered. That's regrettable, because with its anti-science and assertion-over-evidence stance, pseudoscience is now running the USA.

Chris Hayhurst

★★★

THE HAUNTED GENERATION

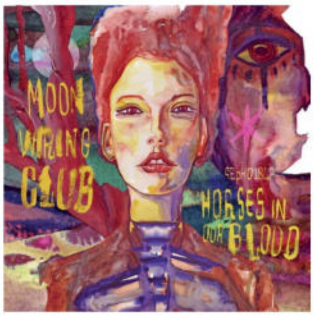
BOB FISCHER ROUNDS UP THE LATEST NEWS FROM THE PARALLEL WORLDS OF POPULAR HAUNTOLOGY

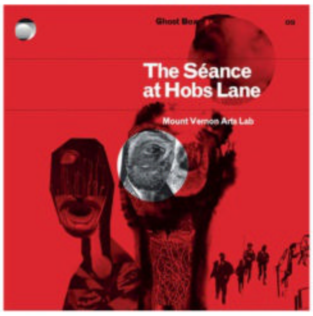
"All Moon Wiring Club albums revolve around a central concept," explains Ian Hodgson. "Cats, gonks, or conspiracies within a Tudor Manor House. I'd had a vague 'horse concept' in mind for about 15 years, without ever managing to pin it down. But then, while I was working on these tracks, I started to envisage dried-up, baking hot riverbed trails with spectral horse riders whispering around them. And dusty ghost towns with invisible, meandering clip-clop pathways…"

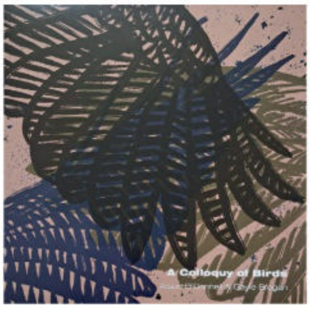
For almost two decades, Ian has been creating synæsthetic soundscapes in his guise as Moon Wiring Club, and his windswept new record *Horses in Our Blood* is indeed, as he pragmatically puts it, "the MWC Horse Album". Drifting between its funk-fuelled beats are Morricone-esque flutes and arid, fly-blown slabs of ambience, all created – as with the bulk of his 30-odd albums – using the software of his trusty Playstation 2. "There is a narrative that wends its way through," says Ian. "But it drifts away from clarification on the wheezy breeze and becomes apparent only when you're nodding off."

Those unfamiliar with Ian's work have an expansive parallel universe of music and art to explore. *Horses in Our Blood* comes swathed in haunting watercolours by Clinkskell-based painter Algernon Aldridge, whose work – Ian insists – is still under-appreciated 13 years after his death from spontaneous human combustion. Giddy up to www.moonwiringclub.com.

Meanwhile, despite growing up in the Italian city of Palermo, Alessio Bosco has somehow crafted an album that captures perfectly the drizzly ennui of watching the BBC2 Test Card with a nasty dose of the mumps. Recorded under the name 30 Door Key, Alessio's album *A Warning to the Curious* is a selection of melodic instrumentals, with the likes of 'Edda's Dream' and 'Old Ones' adding hints of Folk Horror that will delight fans of early Ghost Box Records. Dig it up from subexoticrecords.bandcamp.com.

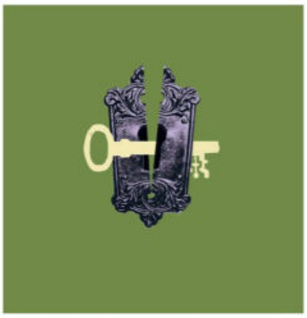


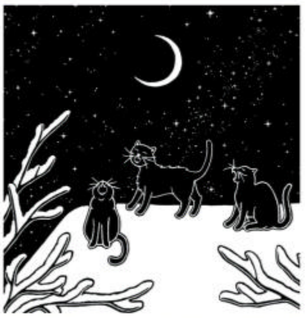


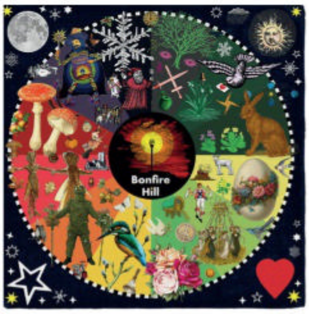


And speaking of Ghost Box, the label's ongoing reissue campaign has reached the extraordinary Mount Vernon Arts Lab album, *The Séance at Hobs Lane*. Recorded in 2001 by Glaswegian tape-mangler Drew Mulholland and his friends, it was originally released by Ghost Box in 2007 before drifting inexorably into the ether. Summoned once more to the table, it's a movement-defining combination of fizzly electronics and austere Victoriana. Is there anybody there? Head to ghostbox.co.uk and tap once for yes.

As new genres go, "funereal cat folk" is at the more esoteric end of the scale, but that's how Isle of Lewis resident Ali Murray describes his bizarre new album *Catmandu*. It is, essentially, a collection of folk ballads performed entirely by cats. Or, more accurately, by Ali himself singing "miaow miaow miaow" all the way through every single song. As the man himself laconically notes, it's "not for everyone", and dog-owners in particular might be well advised to issue a trigger warning before playing it in the vicinity of unsuspecting pooches. But it is delightfully strange, purring away at felinesofthenight.bandcamp.com. It should, however, probably be kept well away from *A Colloquy of Birds*. This charming album about the folklore of ornithology is performed by the resolutely human voices of Alison O'Donnell and Gayle Brogan, and can be found hopping around the branches of sonidopolifonico.bandcamp.com.







Also included in my current dawn chorus: Micro Moon, an Anglo-Spanish duo whose piano-led EP *Figure in a Landscape* takes inspiration from both the concrete sound mirrors of Romney Marsh and the hydroelectric "Fábrica da Luz" of the Galician mountains. Hear its lingering echoes at claypipemusic.co.uk. Whitby duo David Owen and Rebecca Denniff have given a CD release to their sprawling electro-folk project *A Year on Bonfire Hill*, celebrating the tangled weirdness that infuses this mythical moorland location on "darkling nights when the veil is thin". Put your wellies on and head to bonfirehill.bandcamp.com. And those who like their haunted soundtracks with a glittery disco beat should shake a leg to *Starburst – The Album*, a celebration of the legendary British sci-fi magazine from Phil "British Stereo Collective" Heeks. Shimmy to thebritishstereocollective.bandcamp.com and groove along with the theme from 'Moonbase Britannica'.

Anyone seeking quieter refuge, however, could perhaps consider praying at the altar of David Soulscorch's snappily-titled Rural District Lo-Fi Recording Project. David's new album *Time Travelling in a Sussex Church* combines soothing drones with field recordings from a South Downs place of worship whose exact location remains a closely-guarded secret. Pealing bells, chirruping birdsong and the authoritative voice of tour guide Lucy Laguda are woven around gently elegiac beats.

"Come springtime, the Saxon graveyards are full of ox-eye daisies and every shadow is a peep into the past," explains David, poetically. "And I really enjoy using my pocket microphone to record old church doors". Visit ruraldistrictlofirecordingproject.bandcamp.com, where he's probably still pottering around the vestibule.

Visit the Haunted Generation website at www.hauntedgeneration.co.uk, send details of new releases, or memories of the original "haunted" era to hauntedgeneration@gmail.com

Bleak senior moments

Daniel King finds James Ashcroft's exploration of torment in an old people's home powerful but overly disturbing, while a toothless Hong Kong vampire comedy gets better treatment than it deserves

The Rule of Jenny Pen

Dir James Ashcroft, NZ 2024
In cinemas 17 March

This is a superbly made, but deeply upsetting, thriller about a psychopath who terrorises his fellow residents in a care home.

Stefan Mortensen (Geoffrey Rush) is a judge who is recovering in a care home following a stroke. He is cantankerous, rude, snobbish and intolerant. He manages to alienate not only his roommate Tony Garfield (David Henare), a former All Black, but also the staff, particularly the brusque manager Madeline (Holly Shanahan). However, Stefan soon realises that there is an even more unpleasant resident than himself in the home: doll-wielding Dave Crealy (John Lithgow), who enjoys cruelly tormenting people during the night.

It's a curious film. In some quarters it's being promoted as a horror film, in others as a thriller. While there are elements of those two genres within it, more than anything it felt to me like torture porn. These are fundamentally decent people, more vulnerable than most, who are subjected to the most awful indignities. It may be that director James Ashworth is attempting to draw a parallel between the suffering of the characters in the film and the real suffering of senior citizens stuck in the care system. At any rate, the film has an extremely jaundiced view of senior care. Leaving aside the psycho, the staff are – with one or two exceptions – uninterested, lazy and stupid. Whatever the film's intentions, it is extremely uncomfortable to watch, if not outright distressing.

> *The normally avuncular John Lithgow creates a proper monster*

What saves it are the script and the performances. Stefan is, as one might expect from a judge, learned, literate and with a nice line in waspish put downs. There is a funny but heartbreaking speech by Tony in which he explains why he does not raise a complaint against Dave, despite what the latter does to him. Geoffrey Rush gets the best part and has fun playing the curmudgeon turned vigilante, while the normally avuncular John Lithgow creates a proper monster in Dave Crealy.

The film has an excellent soundtrack too. It uses a selection of what might disparagingly be called easy listening pop tunes – including Gene Pitney and Matt Monro – as an ironic counterpoint to the misery we witness. Indeed, the song that plays over the end credits is "Misery Misery Misery" by Jimmy Gilmer. Between these songs, the score by John Gibson is suitably unsettling.

A film of high quality, then, and I recommend that people see it – but the subject matter is so upsetting that I doubt anyone will want to see it twice.

Daniel King

★★★☆☆

Doctor Vampire

Dir Jamie Luk, Hong Kong 1990
Eureka!, £17.99 (Blu-ray)

The Hong Kong comedy-horror genre kicked off with 1985's *Mr Vampire*, which was highly successful and spawned three sequels (or four, depending on who you talk to) and lots of other similarly themed features. One of these is *Doctor Vampire*, which came out at what proved to be the fag end of the cycle and didn't do well. On one of the audio commentaries East Asian film expert Frank Djeng says that out of the highest grossing films released that year it came 91st. Out of 100.

The story concerns a young doctor (Bowie Lam) who, while at a medical conference in England, is bitten by a sexy vampire (Ellen Chan). He returns to Hong Kong and his chaste girlfriend (Sheila Chan), but soon starts to exhibit signs of vampirism himself. His problems multiply when the vampire and her Master (Peter Kjaer) come looking for him.

It's easy to see why it wasn't popular then and just as easy to see why it hasn't aged well. The comedy is both incredibly broad and incredibly juvenile, so much so that this could easily have been titled 'Carry on Doctor Vampire'. The horror element is there, but isn't remotely horrifying. In short, like most comedy-horrors, from any country, it isn't funny enough and it isn't frightening enough. To my mind the only film which has successfully pulled this trick off is John Landis's 1981 *An American Werewolf in London*. I get that a sense of humour that plays well in one country won't necessarily play well in another, but the fact that the film flopped on its home turf must tell you something. There are jokes about a nurse thinking three doctors are homosexual, the vampire bites our hero not on the neck, but on the dick, and so on. If you find that sort of thing hilarious – and many people did in the 1970s – then *Doctor Vampire* will be right up your street. The final confrontation with the vampire master goes on forever – well, a good 20 minutes – and the best bit is a right old punch-up on the set of an amateur Peking Opera production. We get spiritual powers, vampire powers, sword fights, martial arts, big tits – you name it. They really threw the kitchen sink at this.

Being a professional, I did watch it again, this time with the first of two audio commentaries, this one by the aforementioned Djeng and fellow expert John Charles. It's useful for background details about the production and potted biographies of the cast, but there's precious little analysis of the film itself, probably because that would be impossible, so slight is it. This is the film's first Blu-ray release, and it looks a million dollars compared to the first time I saw it. The extras are good too; commentaries, short documentaries and other bits and pieces. The people at Eureka! rarely let you down, so this film gets an exemplary polish that it really doesn't deserve.

Daniel King

★★☆☆☆

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TELEVISION

FT's resident couch potatoes, **STU NEVILLE & RUTH MORRIS** eye up the small screen's fortean offerings

You half expect Midge Ure to lurch out from between the trees...

A familiar, diminutive, anoraked figure emerges from the darkness, bursting with enthusiasm and new tales to tell – he leans into the camera, and breathily asks: "Are you…" – challenging pause – "Team Believer or Team Sceptic?" Yes, Danny Robins, his red coat and his weird hairstyle are back with series two of *Uncanny*, joined once more by the pub-dwelling Waldorf and Statler team of Ciaran O'Keefe (Sceptic) and Evelyn Hollow (Believer), as he brings us another quartet of spooky stories following last year's successful leap from radio to TV: unusually, the Radio 4 version also continues, last year ranging further afield for some USA-based weird yarns with varying degrees of credibility (and varying degrees of ridiculous sceptical explanation.)

Anyway, back to BBC2 and domestic shores, kicking off with a farmhouse on the outskirts of Bury with a seemingly sinister life of its own and, it transpires, a genuinely sinister past. The prime witness to the supernatural doings is Liam, an outwardly no-nonsense, former pro-Rugby player who as a child was regularly terrified by noises, bangs, crashes, apparitions of small children, foreboding silhouettes and an intense, oppressive atmosphere ("Bloody Hell, Liam!" exclaims Danny, getting the catchphrase in early and with his facial mobility compensating for the immobility of his hair). But it wasn't just Liam – his siblings, parents and grandparents all experienced the same things over several decades; which does beg the question of why they stayed there. Following suggestions that airflow may have had an effect on the activity witnessed, Danny climbs into a wind tunnel where he is blasted with gusts of up to 80mph; at which speed the books blew off the desk and Danny's hair actually moved. More sedate research reveals the building had previously been an orphanage with an attached school run by a Belgian order of nuns devoted to Christ and child-cruelty in roughly equal measure; some of the anecdotes are a hard listen, and the fact that in the second episode Danny has to implore members of the audience not to travel there to take issue with the current school (this was 100 years ago and the nuns are long gone) demonstrates the kind of impact it clearly had.

Episode two shifts its gaze to a small town in Buckinghamshire: this time the actual location isn't disclosed, maybe partly as a consequence of last week's specific coordinates enabling a pitchfork-and-torch-wielding mob to besiege a modern community primary school with an otherwise comfortable Ofsted rating. This week we meet Sybil, resplendent in vintage dress and like Danny sporting idiosyncratic hair. Sybil ran a charity shop in a 300-year-old building and therein was subjected to various paranormal activities: once again an intensely forbidding atmosphere, moving objects and an apparition of a man walking downstairs from the knees up (causing momentary puzzlement as to where the rest of his legs were going; it soon becomes apparent that they mean his legs are visible only above shin-level, prompting a neat diversion to talk about Harry Martindale and his similarly amputated Roman legion swanning about under York). Curiouser, though, is the fact that everybody in the shop seems to know the shinless wonder is called George. Armed with this vital clue – after all, George was hardly a common name in, erm, Georgian England, Danny seeks academic advice from a man in the standard male local historian uniform of hipster hornrims, tweed suit and twee hat (though sans the usual waxed moustache). It transpires there was indeed a George at the property, a bankrupt haberdasher who'd moved in with his daughter and promptly died: it has to be said, in the pantheon of ghosts that includes headless horsemen, grey ladies and black monks, skint fabric-merchants rank quite low, but their effect can be nonetheless unsettling.

On to part three, and Julian, a slim troubled man with (yet again) a very individual hairstyle (this season really goes all out on the odd barnets) who, growing up as a teenager in a West Yorkshire mining village, had repeated encounters with a shadow figure, quite eerily rendered in the frequent flashbacks. Julian had by his own admission a great number of challenges as a child and adolescent, factors that Ciaran tactfully points out may exacerbate an already fraught emotional state. However, Danny's innate story-telling ability knows how to pace these episodes, and it is then that he reveals that Julian was not the only one prey to these apparitions, but so were friends of his, one of whom is dutifully called upon to say what he saw.

We are told tales of teenage boys sneaking off through woods to the graveyard in the dead of night being pursued through the trees by a strange 'gentleman' who was blacker than black. This prompts Danny, armed with his magic torch and a smoke machine, to attempt a recreation of what the lads saw that night; sadly, the rendered effect is less reminiscent of Slenderman than the video for Ultravox's 'Vienna' (you half expect Midge Ure and his small moustache to lurch out from between the trees).

Cue the finale, where we meet a family who took possession of a repossessed house that turned out to be possessed, boasting an imaginary friend, a grumpy old man, a fall down the stairs and an alarmingly high hamster mortality rate. Off Danny pops to the famous haunted corridor in Hampton Court Palace to wave his equipment around, using his EMF meter in the style of a man dissuading a wasp from alighting upon his cream tea. In fairness, Danny does pick up some very high readings, which Ciaran later points out could be due to electrical cabling and indeed could have a similar effect in the house in question. The series ends with some interesting updates and despite the variability of the stories told, it shows no signs of running out of steam (or hairspray) quite yet.

THE WORLD OF STRANGE PHENOMENA

ForteanTimes

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Elvis Presley

I enjoyed "Elvis: King Of The Strange" [**FT453:28-35**] and can recommend searching out the book *Elvis Presley Speaks*, written in 1978 by prolific paranormal author Hans Holzer (1920-2009). Featuring a communication with Presley from beyond the grave by medium housewife Dorothy Sherry, who not only had contact with the King almost every night during 1978 but was also his wife, apparently, in many other lives (she calls him 'El') – naturally, Presley avows his love for her several times; indeed, the book is dedicated to her, "By request of Elvis Presley". She also claims that she was due to be reincarnated into the body of Presley's twin brother (who died at birth) but caused his death when she changed her mind, because she didn't want to be a boy! There are pages of illegible automatic writing by Presley, in which he requests Holzer to write his life after death story personally, and he reveals himself to have been a "psychic healer" when he was alive, plus endless details of his new life on the other side; Holzer, who describes himself as a "scientific investigator", makes the startling statement: "They do give concerts over there [the afterlife] but of course they don't have records" (well, of course). It's all a terrific hoot and who's to say their truth isn't real?

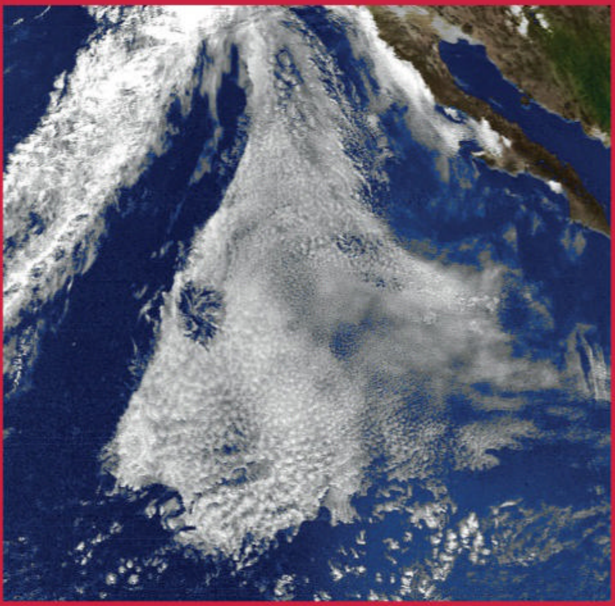
Michael Slatter
By email

Regarding the Elvis feature: in 2001, I had the pleasure of interviewing Tom Robins, author of *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues, Still Life with Woodpecker*, etc. He had quite the story to tell about Elvis, the role he – Tom – feared he had played in the death of The King, and the fact that Presley's interest in all things fortean was active right up until his very last breath:

"Contrary to popular belief, I didn't kill Elvis Presley," he said. "For years, there was this rumour that Elvis was reading my first novel [*Another Roadside Attraction*] when he died on the toilet. One of the 'Memphis Mafia' [Elvis's entourage] said as much in his memoirs. But according to the official Elvis biography, The King was reading a book which compared sexual positions to signs of the zodiac at the time he died. Which is pretty embarrassing but at least it lets me off the hook!"

Richard Luck
Welwyn Garden City, Hertfordshire

SIMULACRA CORNER



I run an automated weather station using a Software Defined Radio – this is essentially a little black box of electronics that plugs into my laptop and turns my computer into a radio receiver with the addition of a suitable antenna. One of the things I do with it is capturing NOAA weather satellite images as the satellites pass over. They come in as a radio signal around 137MHz, which I then feed to some software which decodes them and turns them into images. This one caught my eye recently. I am not sure if it is a dog or a cow.

Dave Perks *Rancho Cordova, California*

We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to Fortean Times, PO Box 1200, Whitstable

The Only Key

My friend is a Sister in a large hospital in the north of England, being in a managerial role. Part of her time is spent fulfilling administration duties for a busy gynæcological ward in one of two offices, one being shared with her colleagues and the other solely her office, of which there is but one key due to the sensitive nature of the files held within.

One day she was at the computer in the communal office when she glanced out of the window from which she can view the window of her private office. She noticed a man staring back at her from her own office window. He was holding back the blinds to one side and staring at her across the divide from her own office.

Thinking this strange, my friend made a phone call to the receptionist to enquire whether the hospital's maintenance team had accessed her office. The receptionist was bemused, assuring her that no hospital staff had been through.

My friend then returned her gaze to the window and the man was still there staring. Becoming annoyed now as common etiquette would dictate that he would look away, she took a picture of him with her phone's camera. Remembering that there was only one key for her office, she checked her key chain and was relieved to find the key still in her possession. Deciding to walk around and confront this strange man, she walked to her office, taking approximately 30 seconds; on arrival, she found the door locked and the blinds as they should be. The fact that there is only one key for the office in question and her enquiries to the staff in the immediate area resulted in no sightings of a man in and around her office has led her to believe that she had been staring into the eyes of a ghost.

Claire Kelly
By email

Burke and Hare

In Ghostwatch [**FT454:16**] Alan Murdie refers to Burke & Hare as "body snatchers". This seems to be a common belief, but my understanding is that they were not "resurrection men", i.e. those who raised people up from the grave, but murderers. One of them ran a cheap rooming house off the West Port (off the Grassmarket), and when an elderly tenant died, they realised that, rather than having to answer awkward questions and arrange a funeral, they could make a bob or two by selling the body to anatomists at Edinburgh Medical School. This led to them deliberately seeking out elderly, sick, alcoholic (preferably all three) tenants or other contacts, particularly those with no known family or friends to miss them. They would then proceed to get them very drunk, render them no longer alive, and sell the corpse. Legend has it that the scheme was exposed when a medical student recognised the subject on the dissecting slab as a woman (possibly a sex-worker, although that could just be the usual salacious gossip) he had encountered just a few days before (and thought youngish and fairly healthy).

Wikipedia's excellent coverage, however, says that the

Migraines and time slips

I read with interest Rob Gandy's feature on the Bold Street Time Slips and Dr Winsper's overview of the physics of such phenomena [**FT452:30-36**]. While I can offer no all-encompassing explanation for the experiences of the 'time slippers' in the feature, I was intrigued by one element that was mentioned and might be able to shed some light on it, based on my own experiences.

William Stevens talks about his time slip being preceded by the onset of a migraine and some of the other cases quoted talked about feeling unwell or depressed just prior to the event. As someone who has suffered from migraines for nearly half a century and who also experiences abrupt mood swings induced by changes in barometric pressure, these were sensations that I could readily identify with. While there are any number of 'classic' symptoms that precede a migraine – the most common mentioned is the corona of sparkling lights that interrupt your vision – there are any number of less frequent symptoms and effects that can strike without warning. Not every migraine sufferer will experience these and even people who are susceptible to them may only encounter them infrequently.

When people talk about peripheral vision, where you can only 'see' objects on the outskirts of your field of vision and not in the centre, the implication is that you are aware of a blank area in the middle, as if someone had placed an obstruction in front of you and you could only see around it. However, on the occasions that a migraine has reduced my eyesight down to peripheral vision this was not how I perceived it. In essence, my brain attempted to rationalise what was happening by closing up the blind spot, like two curtains drawing together. As such, it was not immediately apparent to me that there was anything wrong with my eyesight.

The first time this happened to me was when I was standing on a London Underground station platform awaiting a train. Looking at one of the enormous posters on the tunnel wall opposite, I was amused to note that whoever had put up the poster had missed out some of the individual sheets in the centre. Unaware at that point that there was anything wrong with my vision, all I could see was the far left-hand and far right-hand sides of the poster; the central section was invisible to me, but my brain couldn't accept this and had joined the two sides together. However, if I turned my head to the left or to the right, the 'invisible' section would slide into view, while the edge towards which I was tilted would disappear correspondingly. The sensation was like looking at two overlapping panels where the obstructed section only becomes visible as your perspective changes.

Having now realised that there was actually something severely wrong with my vision, my assumption was that it must be an impending migraine. Although I had no other symptoms and was in no pain, I had enough experience of the condition by then to suspect that any bizarre ocular disturbance was likely to be an unfamiliar symptom. Sure enough, within the hour I was experiencing the more common pain around the eye socket and nausea, but had fortunately got home by then. And once the migraine had passed, my vision was back to normal again.

The reason I mention this is that it could explain the experiences of some of the people in the feature who described vehicles and pedestrians disappearing and reappearing momentarily. It wasn't that they were vanishing, just that they were passing in and out of their blind spot. This was certainly how I perceived things on my trip home that afternoon – people walking towards me would blink out for a second, then become visible again as they passed me by. Although I found the anomaly fascinating, I appreciate that it would be quite alarming if you were unable to rationalise it quickly.

Of course this cannot explain the other phenomena experienced by the subjects in the feature, but it does raise one interesting question: given that many of the 'time slippers' experienced symptoms associated with migraines prior to their experiences, is it possible that a susceptibility to migraines is necessary to allow you to slip through time? If so, it would be one positive benefit to suffering such a debilitating condition.

David Taylor
Stamford, Lincolnshire

I read Dr Ann Winsper's article [**FT452:34-36**] with interest. I was particularly struck by the account of William Stevens. For me, the key point here was that Mr Stevens had his experience immediately after (or during) an attack of migraine.

The potential connection with migraine resonated because it immediately reminded me of a personal experience involving my family about four years ago. We were called in the small hours of the morning by my son, because his wife (prone to migraines) had become acutely unwell with headache and confusion during her pregnancy with her second child. On arrival at the house, it was clear there was a major issue. She could not recognise her husband or myself and my wife and was clearly disorientated in time and space. Her speech, though clear, was nonsensical. A swift trip to hospital took place amongst considerable anxiety. All investigations were normal and my daughter-in-law was discharged within 24 hours, completely recovered, but with no memory of the period in question. She has never had an attack of this nature before, or since (only "ordinary" migraines). The diagnosis was of Acute Confusional Migraine (ACM). Despite working in medicine and allied fields for my whole working life, I had never heard of this condition.

Acute Confusional Migraine (ACM) is a very rare variant of migraine. Although it is most typically seen in children and adolescents, it has more recently been observed in adults, although very few cases have been noted. Reported symptoms in adults include: headache, memory loss, disorientation, or a loss of a sense of place and time, altered awareness and impaired cognition. Auditory and visual hallucinations, whilst also rare, can occur in migraines (generally hemiplegic migraines).

Most accounts of ACM involved individual case reports (see links below), but it clearly exists as a condition. Mr Stevens clearly describes migraine, memory loss and a degree of confusion and impaired cognition. Impaired cognition could easily lead to misinterpretation of events or impaired/altered memory of what Mr Stevens experienced, and it is at least possible that he could also have experienced visual and auditory hallucinations.

I believe ACM must at least be a possibility in this case and should be considered in other cases occurring in close temporal proximity to migraine attack.

Nick Clements
By email

REFERENCES

A rare case of an Acute Confusional Migraine in an Adult (P1.9-043)
https://www.neurology.org/doi/10.1212/WNL.92.15_supplement.P1.9-043

Acute Confusional Migraine: Unusual Great Masquerader – Case Report and Literature Review
https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7605926/

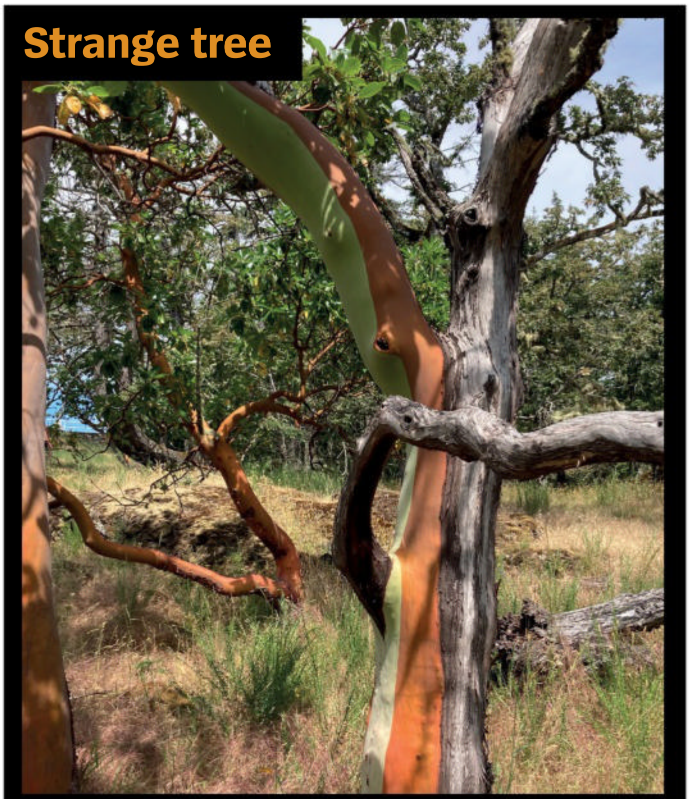
Can Migraine Attacks Cause Hallucinations?
https://www.healthline.com/health/migraine-hallucinations#ocular-hallucinations

discovery of their final victim's corpse by other tenants brought their enterprise to an end. (Although it does appear that some of the bodies were still warm on delivery to anatomist Robert Knox – and on one occasion an assistant did recognise the victim. Ethics and morality do seem to be somewhat missing in the story.)

Hare was persuaded to turn King's Evidence, and the result was that Burke was hanged, and his skeleton is still held in the Anatomical Museum at Edinburgh Medical School. A must for the morbid.

Owen Whiteoak
By email

Strange tree



Here is a somewhat unusual photo of an Arbutus tree near my home. They are normally red after the bark peels off, but this one wanted to stand out in addition to the rather sinister branch arms!
Richard Earl *Victoria, British Columbia*

Comments on FT454

Regarding the Mythconceptions piece about not being allowed to die in a particular place (p.25), there was a law regarding the other side of the coin, so to speak. During WWII, Crown Princess Juliana of the Netherlands was in exile in Canada. She became pregnant, and Dutch law stated that no person born on foreign soil could succeed to the throne. Therefore, King George VI issued a proclamation that anywhere the Princess was when about to give birth would be considered extra-territorial, i.e. not part of any country, so the baby – Princess Margriet – was not born on foreign soil, and could potentially succeed to the throne of the Netherlands.

- The account by Heather MacDougal of appearing spectrally to her partner (p.62) reminds me of an experience some friends had. I'll call them Sue and Jack. Jack was away in Malta (if I recall correctly), although I don't recall the reason. His fiancée Sue was at home in England, and woke up suddenly one night to the sight of what she thought was an old witch standing at the bottom of her bed. It only lasted two or three seconds. When she told Jack about it on the phone the next day, he recounted how he had emerged from an alley the night before and almost collided with a wizened old woman, and it had given him quite a shock. This appears to have occurred at the same time that Sue had her shock.
- Strange Deaths (p.72) recounts chimpanzees using stone hammers and anvils to crack nuts. This reminds me of rumours on the Internet that Idi Amin trained chimpanzees to use machetes to defend his compounds. I can't see how that would have been an effective strategy, and I question its veracity. Wouldn't humans with guns be a more reliable and effective option?
- In the account of the Sverris Saga, in 'Strange Continent' (p.20), it is implied that archæologists established the year of death of the body in the well via DNA. Although I claim no expertise in this area, I don't think this is possible. Surely carbon dating is the usual method, and that even then the best you can hope for is a 20-year window?
- The UFO Files article on drones (pp.26-27) highlights the gaps in education that many politicians worldwide seem to have. For example, Nancy Mace of South Carolina thinks that drones could be from outside the Universe. Someone should tell her that according to, like, science, the Universe contains, like, everything that exists, like.

Dave Miles
By email

The Stone Tape

I have become used to the synchronicities that seem to follow me around, to the point that when they occur I just smile and say 'Thank you' to what (or who) ever arranges them. The latest one involves the mention of Nigel Kneale's TV play, *The Stone Tape* [**FT454:56**]. About 10 days before the magazine arrived, the Zoom group of which I am a member had been discussing this TV play and the concept of powerful impressions being recorded into the fabric of buildings (which kind of makes sense) and since I had seen the play first time around, I decided to see if it was still available to watch on line – and it was, so I watched it. Then, when the mag arrived and I learned that it was now available in a Blu-ray disc, I was delighted. The special effects, although very good for the time, seem a little bit ropey now, although the soundtrack is as stark, atmospheric and creepy as ever.

The reason that it stayed in my mind for so long is that when I watched it in 1972 (when I was around 28 years old) I was working nightshift as an instrument technician at the now-demolished Longannet Power Station. Power stations, especially fossil fuel stations like Longannet, are really big and lonely places with relatively few staff around, especially on nightshift. I had been sent to the coal plant, which was over a mile from the Turbine Hall and main plant, and there was no one around, just me and my tools and many thousands of tons of coal, plus the control tower that loomed like a Martian war machine over the coal tips. It was a pitch-black, windy night and the wind absolutely howled and shrieked around the steel structure of the tower.

I was fine till I climbed the tower and stood in the control room, and realised that all I could see was my own reflection in the windows of the tower and, quite unbidden, the play started to rerun in my head, especially the last few seconds, and I started absolutely bricking it – but I managed to do the calibrations and make my way (rather hastily) back down the several flights of metal stairs. Before I got out of the door, some bats appeared and swooped around; what little composure I had left vanished and I yelled my head off, questioned the parentage of the bats, and ran flat-out for the van while my tools and meters bounced along behind me. That was the effect the remarkable *The Stone Tape* had on me, so now, being considerably older (I'm 81) I will buy the Blu-ray version, pour a generous whisky and enjoy it all over again. I will not, however, be climbing any more towers in the middle of nowhere!

Brian Allan
Kincardine-on-Forth, Clackmannanshire

Luis Elizondo

David Clarke's review of *Imminent*, Luis Elizondo's recent 'behind-the-scenes' book about UAPs/UFOs, is a generally fair analysis [**FT453:55**]. I too have read the book and share some of Dr Clarke's concerns – I winced at the passages describing glowing orbs materialising in the author's home.

Continued on p.62

It Happened to Me...

Readers write in with their own accounts of strange phenomena

Church experiences

● During my teens my family belonged to, and was quite active at, the First Presbyterian Church in Niagara Falls, New York State, about 15 minutes from our house. I was the Youth Group leader, my father was their Boy Scout leader, my mother was in the choir, etc. We spent a lot of time there even between our usual three hours every Sunday.

My best friend and I were there in 1970 setting up a Hallowe'en Party in the basement of the church. The rooms we were decorating were right below the sanctuary itself. For this occasion, I had keys to the church since no one else would be there. We let ourselves in and immediately locked the door behind us before going downstairs to decorate. All was going well; we were decorating and talking and having a good time when suddenly we realised that there was someone walking on the floor above our heads. We listened for a bit and the footsteps were in the sanctuary (the big room with the pulpit and pews) and they were walking around the aisles. Knowing we should be the only two people there, we went to the payphone (yes, it was that long ago) and called the police.

They promptly sent over an officer. We had to go back upstairs and pass the sanctuary doors – which were closed – to answer the door when the policeman showed up. We told him that there was someone walking around that shouldn't be there. He immediately opened the sanctuary doors and called out to ask if anyone was there. No answer. Then he went down every pew row and looked to see if anyone was hiding. No one. He methodically searched every room in the building on all three floors. He even opened the back doors to the alley and asked some passing dustmen if they had seen anything suspicious. Nope.

We were relieved but felt a bit foolish – but mostly relieved. The three of us went back to the rooms in the basement so he could sit down and write his report. As he was taking our names and doing that routine stuff, footsteps started up over our heads again. I could feel my eyes getting bigger and rounder as I stared at the officer and slowly raised my finger to point at the ceiling. I was so terrified by this time I couldn't even talk. He turned his eyes up toward the ceiling and I saw his eyes get wider too. My girlfriend's eyes were getting glassy with tears. We listened to the footsteps retracing their path around the sanctuary. Finally, the officer said, "Well, ladies, I don't know what you're going to do but I'm leaving." And we grabbed our purses and the church keys and left with him – decorations be damned.

"By this time I was so terrified I couldn't even talk..."

When I repeated this story to my father, he said that on boy scout night they had often heard strange things, but then my mother gave him the eye and he didn't get into what he had heard there.

● And you might wonder if someone died there, right? Well yes, someone had. He literally died in my father's arms. My father, as one of the ushers, spent the time before the service began greeting people at one of the three main doors. When the service started, they closed the doors to the sanctuary and were about to go into the service themselves when a late arrival came in the door from the street. He was not a member of the church. My father thought he was from the old men's home around the corner. He went to sign the book by the door when he suddenly fell backward. My father caught him and lowered him down to the floor. He said he knew immediately it was already too late. The man was already dead when he caught him. He had only three dollars in his pocket and no ID. I hope he had someone to claim his body, but maybe that's why he's still there, walking around. And don't you wonder why someone would suddenly decide to go to church as their life was about to run out? That always made me wonder.

As it expanded and grew in membership, the church bought the property next door to use for church school classes, a nursery, youth events, etc. The building was a 19th century YMCA complete with a walk-in fireplace, gym, running track, pool, billiard room, marble flooring, and rooms galore. It was three storeys high, and had two sub-basements. It was *huge* – and creepy. The church still stands, but the YMCA building burned down many years ago now.

As with the church, it was kept locked and the keys were carefully controlled. My father and I were there one day. I can't remember why, but we had followed protocol by unlocking the door to get in and immediately locking it behind us.

We were on the second floor and getting ready to leave when I looked down the hallway to see the fire door at the other end of the hall was open. I told my father, and he made the *very long* walk down the hallway, looking in each room as he went, to close the door. He closed the door (which was in the billiard room) and came back to where I was standing. As we turned again to go, I looked back, and the fire door was open *again*. My father went back and closed it again. This time he closed and *tested* the door to make sure it was latched properly, and then walked back to me. Once more, I looked behind him and said, "The door is open again." I didn't actually see it open; I think that was because as he walked toward me he blocked my sight of the door. He looked down the hall and just said, "Let's leave." He called the custodian to report the door being "broken" and I don't know what happened after that.

● And now one of my favourite stories...

I was in the annex (the old YMCA) with our Youth Group. We met in the second sub-basement of the building, so we had to come up three flights of steps to even get to the first floor. Again, all protocol had been followed: unlock the door, everyone enters, the door is immediately locked behind us.

The meeting went fine, and we were preparing to leave (which had to be done as a group since the door was locked) and I had wandered up a flight of stairs to the pool level which was in the first sub-basement. I was standing, waiting, when suddenly a young lady came around the far corner of the hallway and walked toward me. She would have been coming from the first-floor level of the building.

From this point, I never took my eyes off her. She walked toward me, and I can still picture her today. She was dressed in the current fashion of the late 1960s or early 1970s: She had on a flower-patterned mini skirt, a short sleeved, dark-coloured top, and had shoulder-length dark hair with bangs. I even remember her wearing patterned stockings which I thought might be fishnet. She continued toward me down a 30ft [9m] hallway, then suddenly turned and went into a room that was about 15ft [4.5m] from me. I kept staring at the door because I was wondering who it was and what she was doing.

The group then came up and the adult asked if we were all accounted for and I told him that someone had come down and gone into "that room", pointing at the door. Equally puzzled, he went over and opened the door. It was an old, unused restroom with two stalls and a sink. The doors were off the stalls, and the only window was a small one 10ft [3m] up the wall that was closed and had probably been closed for 50 years. There was no one in there. No other exit. No place to hide. If that was a ghost, she could have walked next to you on the street, and you would never have known.

● And now the last thing that I remember happening in that church. The church proper. In the sanctuary. Let me state up front that I was a wishy-washy believer in religion even when my parents forced me to go to church every week. I'm not a believer at all now.

I don't even have a firm belief in what ghosts are or why they occur. I have a lot of theories but none of them involve God or Jesus. All I can tell you is that if someone else told this story I would blow it off as pure imagination. I'm embarrassed to tell it, even. But when I say I don't believe in God, I remember this and wonder if perhaps I'm wrong.

It was Easter Sunday in 1968, during our big church service. The church, I remember, was really packed that day. Everyone seemed to be incredibly happy and merry and singing with great fervour. There was a nice feeling in the sanctuary.

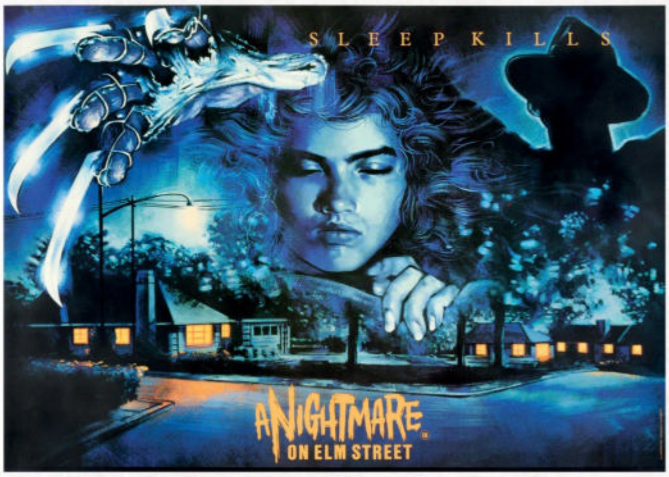
In the very front of the church, between the two pulpits, was a life-sized gold-coloured cross on a lit blue glass background. At some point I looked at it and saw, to my utter disbelief, the cloudy form of a body on the cross. Not clear, no definite outlines, but there was clearly a mass of *something* there. I tried to figure out how the church staff had managed to do that. I was looking for lights that were new or other things that might have cast or projected a shadow. There was nothing and it finally faded away by the end of the service.

After the service was my Sunday School class. I hadn't mentioned what I had seen to anyone. Everyone was coming in and settling down and another girl in the class suddenly said, "Did anyone else see that thing on the cross?"

I don't remember much after that. I might have gone into shock. I can't remember if anyone else saw it or not and the teacher, who was my uncle, is now dead so I can't ask him what he remembers.

The church still stands, but the "annex" building which had the door that wouldn't stay closed and the young lady who didn't seem to exist burned down many years ago now.

Giselle ScotDeerie
By email


SLEEP KILLS
A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET

"Long black trousers and a red-and-black striped shirt"

Fred Or Dead

Re-reading over my recent article about Donald Trump and his demon-hunters [**FT453:46-49**] dredged up some long-forgotten hallucinatory events from my own paranormal past. The part about Trump's chief journalistic cheerleader Tucker Carlson claiming to have been attacked by (possibly extraterrestrial) sleep-demons in his bed one night reminded me of the old 1980s *Nightmare On Elm Street* Hollywood horror films, whose chief celluloid demon, Freddie Kreuger, possessed a notably similar *modus operandi*: he killed sleepers in their dreams at night, scratching them to death with his gloved iron claws. Had Carlson just been watching too many 40-year-old video nasties before his bedtime one evening? My friends and I certainly had back during the 1980s.

Sent off to the local shops one bright sunny afternoon aged six or seven to fetch groceries for the father of a friend, my classmate and I were also handed a 50 pence to buy some sherbet. Evidently the stuff was just Class-A drugs dyed bright yellow to get it through customs, however, as on the way back we both looked up at the precise same instant, saw something utterly inexplicable gliding silently towards us across a directly adjacent field, screamed in terror, and ran away.

It was a dwarfish, two-dimensional 'man', but without any actual 'man' part to it – just the fellow's disembodied clothing, long black trousers (with three legs!) and a red-and-black striped shirt, like that worn by none other than Freddie Kreuger. I seem to remember a black hat floating above the blank space where the figure's head should have been, although I am today unsure as to whether or not this might have been merely a subsequent distorted false-memory addition, intended by my infant self to make the apparition fit in more with the on-screen appearance of Freddie, who also sported a trademark black fedora. Hence, we were both 'seeing' something that quite literally could not have existed, a distorted version of a fictional character with whom our junior friendship group was obsessed from our continued underage watching of Freddie's forbidden films.

Scanning back across the field from the safety of the other side of the road, nothing remained to be seen – because, presumably, there had really been nothing there in the first place. But, looking up into the sky, we both saw a strange 'star'. It was probably just an aeroplane with its lights on in the daytime for some reason, yet our infant minds 'rationalised' it away at the time as being Freddie's spaceship, even though, in the horror films, Kreuger was not an ET at all, but a hideous undead pædophile.

I shall not name the boy with whom I shared this bizarre vision, to avoid embarrassing him, but did talk the event over with him around 10 years later when we were both at secondary school, and he remembered the whole thing too, confirming it did really happen as just discussed. A keen FT reader from 11 or 12, from that age onwards I had naively/hopefully theorised that 'Freddie' may have been some kind of collectively manifested thought-form, like a tulpa or egregore, somehow created by the kids of the neighbourhood and our excessive obsession with Hollywood horror vids. Growing older, I had long since filed this away instead as a shared one-off mental illusion of some unidentified kind, like a *folie a deux* (whatever one of those actually is, other than a fancy-sounding French label for something nobody really understands). But, in light of Tucker Carlson's recent alarming confession about being clawed in bed by a nocturnal space-demon, I am minded to think again ...

On the other hand, looking over Carlson's interview about his night-time 'attack' once more, I observe another detail I didn't mention in my article at the time: Tucker Carlson shares his marital bed not only with his wife, as may be expected, but also with his pet dogs. Dogs also have claws, do they not? I don't know the animals' pet-names, but I do hope one of them was called Freddie.

Have any other readers ever 'seen' impossible visions of outright fictional characters themselves, I wonder, either in childhood or as adults?

SD Tucker
Widnes, Cheshire

Pen returned

Having just taken out a subscription to FT and going through the back issues, I came across a reader's letter [**FT454:62**] about asking the fairies to find lost things. Having just lost a favourite pen which I had searched everywhere for I decided that evening to ask for help from the fairies. Imagine my surprise the following morning when entering my study, which I had searched at least twice, and vacuumed, to find my pen on the floor by the desk in plain sight. Given my propensity for losing things, my wife thinks the fairies will be pretty useful.

Paul Dexter
By email

LETTERS

Continued from p.59

However, I didn't think that the review really addressed the book's fundamental problem for sceptics, namely that of Mr Elizondo's status as a senior Pentagon official and his concomitant credibility.

A comparison was drawn with former British civil servant, Nick Pope. But Nick was a relatively junior official when he manned the MoD's UFO desk. He was an executive officer, the lowest management grade. Elizondo, as far as I can tell, taking into account trans-Atlantic grade equivalences, was of a significantly higher rank than Mr Pope. Would Dr Clarke have been so dismissive if an MoD department chief, answerable directly to Ministers, had written this book? Elizondo has been vouched for by members of the US Congress so, whether or not he has been vague about his detailed job description, we do know that he actually worked in the Pentagon, unlike, say, Bob Lazar's alleged stint in Area 51. And, however much Dr Clarke eloquently tries to undermine Elizondo's claims, it remains the case that, *ex officio*, a senior Pentagon officer will have access to classified information that is unlikely ever to be available to Sheffield Hallam University or *Fortean Times*.

I felt that Dr Clarke's closing remarks, about those in "the corridors of power" being no different to the rest of us when it comes to gullibility, came across as something of a cri de cœur. Surely, isn't it more likely that those in "the corridors of power" know a lot more than we do?

Geoff Clifton
Solihull, West Midlands

Aphantasia

I think Richard Bagnall makes a good point when he wonders if aphantasia is a factor in (not) witnessing fortean phenomena [**FT451:64**]. I don't have the condition, but do not recall ever having any inexplicable experiences. However, my wife has aphantasia and has had a vision of sorts. Before we were married, she was in bed with some sort of fever, and eyes suddenly appeared out of the wallpaper, and they were all looking at her. It felt so realistic that she fled downstairs and had to be comforted by her brothers. Although there was nothing supernatural about the incident, it does show that even without a mind's eye one is quite capable of "seeing things".

Dave Miles
By email

I was fascinated to read Richard Bagnall's letter on aphantasia. My son – who, like me, is autistic – has a form of aphantasia which isn't total. I on the other hand have the opposite, hyperphantasia.

When I was very young and watching a film or TV show that scared me, like the usual suspects *Doctor Who* and *Star Trek*, I used to look away from the screen and even cover my eyes when I knew something frightening was coming up, but to no avail as my mind's eye would just continue creating what was on the TV almost as if it was 'screen mirroring'.

I've often wondered about how these neurodivergent conditions factor into witness accounts of the paranormal and our interface with the weird in general. Most people would probably make the naïve assumption that autistic people etc would be less reliable witnesses, but I think the opposite is true.

From an early age due to my hyperphantasia and the sensory issues that come with autism I've had to stop and decide "What am I actually seeing?" For example, as a kid I was playing outside my house when from the corner of my eye I saw a small Chinese dragon like you'd have in a parade come into view. I did a double-take and realised it was just two girls sitting on a skateboard.

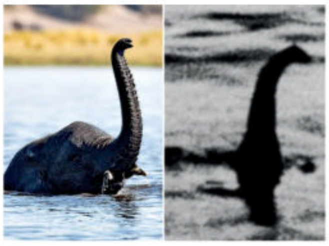
In fact, it is people who don't usually have to question what they are seeing that worry me. How many people have caught what they thought was a glimpse of a Chinese dragon and instantly ran before taking another look and realising it was two girls on a skateboard?

Stu Ferrol
Hexham, Northumberland

Like Richard Bagnall I am aphantasic. There are many research projects studying this type of diversity at both UK and international universities, but I haven't yet come across one which looks at incidence across cultures. I suspect it's because the field is so new that comparative studies are still a way off.

Normally the lack of a mind's eye doesn't affect me at all, but occasionally I find it useful to document things on a camera. Given that, I find the lack of a camera and/or night view scope in Richard Freeman's article about the Waverley Abbey 'dragons' [**FT451:44-49**] baffling. Camera apps are ubiquitous these days and cheap night vision cameras are used by most wildlife enthusiasts. You'd be hard pressed to go anywhere, from concerts to trips to the seaside and not see someone watching life through their screen. Except it seems paranormal researchers.

Jo Blake
Brighton, East Sussex



Loch Ness elephants

Re: Nessie Nostalgia: "The Crypto Kid Investigates" by Martin Gately [**FT250:46-49**]. In the light of revelations that many pictures of the Loch Ness monster were faked, scientific interest in the phenomena of Nessie sightings, surprisingly, has not waned. However, some sightings have not been explained by hoaxes and the prime one of these, mentioned by Martin Gately, was the observation by the Spicers in 1933 of a monster crossing the road in front of them.

Having observed a similar occurrence some 50 years ago in a forest in Nigeria, I was probably primed for the observation I made in 1992. Having visited Loch Ness on a number of occasions and visited the Information Centre, I was intrigued to read an article in *National Geographic.* This showed elephants swimming in a river looking exactly like the fabled Nessie.

Yes, elephants do look like monsters; they swim with their head underwater, trunk held high for breathing (this looks like a long neck) and create large bow waves. They also have the advantage of being able to cross the road and are large enough to take up the full width of a road. So I wrote this up and it was published ("The Monster Makes a Trunk Call", P Goddard, *BIR Bulletin,* Oct 1992, p.91). This made a small amount of sensation at the time and appeared in a local newspaper, and I was questioned on Scottish radio. [Editor's note: The lake-or-sea-monster-as-elephant idea was also suggested in FT almost 50 years ago; see **FT15:16, 30:29, 67, 449:24**]

The main objection to my suggestion seemed to be that there are no elephants in Scotland and that a plesiosaur was therefore much more likely. The radio commentator dismissed the sightings of the monster on land, just as the faker Frank Searle did in 1977 when discussing Nessie with the young Gately… This appeared to be on the basis that Nessie was a plesiosaur and therefore could not walk on land, an obviously circular argument.

It is a fact that circuses and fairs did travel round Scotland with elephants between the two world wars. Let us imagine a scenario in which a circus owner lets his elephant go for a swim in Loch Ness. The day is misty, the elephant comes out of the water and passes in front of a car. In the fog it is seen as a huge monstrous creature. From my experience in Nigeria I will confirm that in such circumstances an elephant in a close encounter does look monstrous! Couple this with the knowledge that an elephant is the only living land animal large enough to take up the width of a road and swim around looking like a plesiosaur in the peaty waters, and we have the answer for all of the sightings that were not fakes.

I was challenged by the radio station to take an elephant to Loch Ness and do the experiment but, for lack of time and funds, this did not happen.

Professor Paul R Goddard MD, FRCR etc
Bristol

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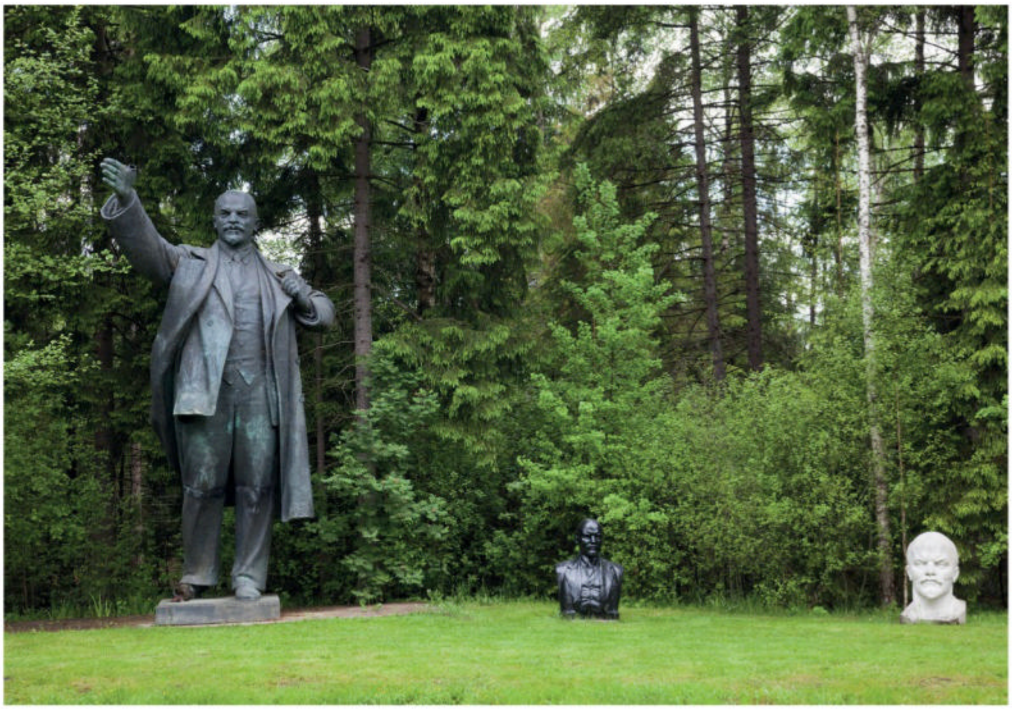


There were more statues of Lenin than you could shake a stick at. A superfluity of statues and busts in various scales, from life-size to huge, in a line stretching into the pine forest as far as I could see. Lenin, Lenin, Lenin. Or "Leninas" as he's known in Lithuanian: the grammar of the Lithuanian language means the names of most famous people are Lithuanianised to ensure agreement of nouns by gender and case ending.

It was a peculiar set of circumstances that brought me to the faux frontier post guard's kiosk at the entrance to Grutas Park. It was a "dark tourism" side-trip that was part of a health tourism honeymoon – I was accompanying my brand new bride, supporting her in getting a hip replacement in Lithuania. It turned out the strange tourist attraction that is Grutas Park is less than 10 minutes by cab from the spa where we were staying for post-op convalescence and physio in Druskininkai, an out-of-the-way health resort in the middle of a huge forest and national park in the southern end of Lithuania, not far from the Belorussian border.

The weather wasn't conducive to the "dark tourism" vibe, though. It was a record-breakingly hot early September; so hot that I was glad to be in the shade of the pine forest. The three-kilometre loop around the site to see over 80 sculptures requires a lot of walking; it's not for people who've just had their hips replaced. So I left my recuperating bride to rest in our room for an afternoon and took a cab to Grutas Park, also unofficially known as "Stalin World".

Grūto parkas

An appropriately brusque woman wearing a young pioneer's red neckerchief took 12 euros off me and I entered the park. The first thing I noticed was that, alongside monuments to the heroes of the Soviet Union, there were many enclosures with rabbits, black swans, exotic geese, emus, several interesting breeds of goat, wallabies, peacocks (of which some were albinos), budgerigars, llamas, alpacas and some very friendly rheas who seemed to like having their photos taken.

Grutas Park was planned in response to a parliamentary committee set up to find a "solution" to the dumped Soviet statuary then littering Lithuania's municipal yards and warehouses. Lithuania had enjoyed independence since the Russian Revolution of 1917, only to be annexed to the Soviet

TOP: A gigantic statue of Lenin and a couple of smaller busts. **LEFT:** The sign welcoming visitors to Grutas Park.

HEMIS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO
MATT SALUSBURY

PHOTOS: ULRICH MAGIN

ABOVE LEFT: A dark scene from 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarves'; in the background left a scene from 'The Great Big Enormous Turnip' is visible. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The Friendly Grutas Park rheas. **BELOW:** Egle the Queen of Grass Snakes is perhaps Lithuania's most famous fairy tale. Egle can be seen at second from left holding her bridegroom, Žilvinas King of the Grass Snakes, flanked on either side by their four children.

Union by force in 1940. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 was welcomed here by pretty much everyone.

A few Soviet monuments had already been torn down and broken up by crowds in 1991 before local boy Villumas Malinauskas, an entrepreneur in berries and mushrooms, started urgent talks with the Ministry of Culture about a plan to save Lithuania's antique Social Realist statuary heritage from the Soviet era at minimal expense to the state. After all, they were sculptures by Lithuanian artists and represented half a century's worth of the nation's public art.

These sculptures had once stood in endless war cemeteries, university campuses and town squares, or at prominent points in those multiple-laned, otherwise empty boulevards and "prospects" going out of town, which are now prime retail and hospitality locations.

Malinauskas said his mission was to keep memories of repression alive and bearable, which he hoped to achieve partly through "irreverence". "Humour," said Malinauskas, "helps overcome the fears of the past." The Park opened on April Fool's Day 2001. Soon after its opening, it won an Ig Nobel award.

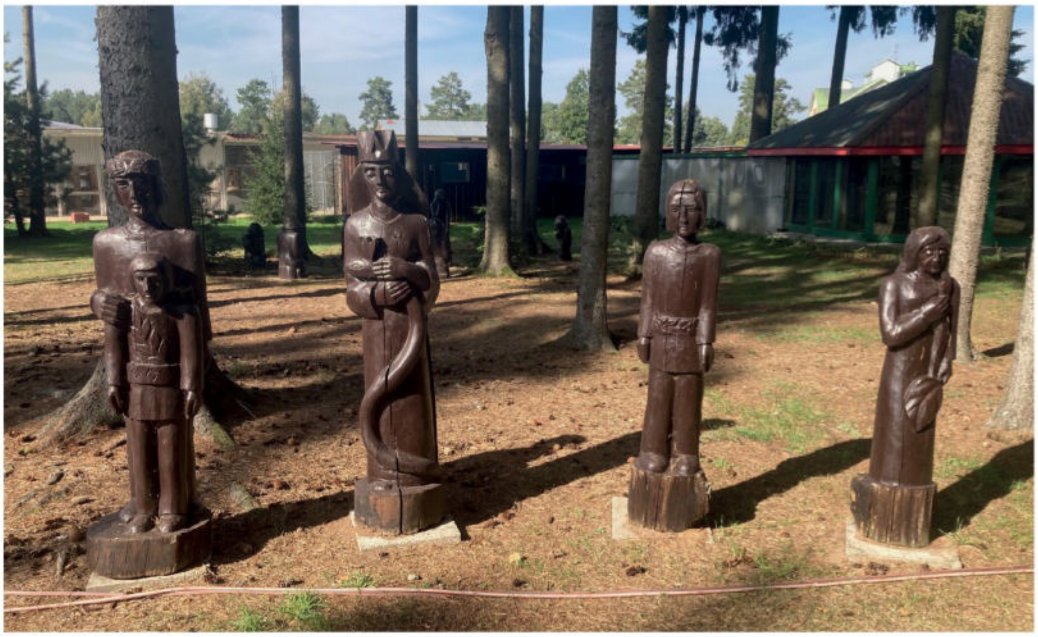
> *Lithuania was a pagan country with many gods and goddesses*

As part of that irreverence, heroes of the Soviet Union share space with much more recent-looking "naive art", wooden sculptures of scenes from fairy tales. There's a particularly sinister-looking encounter between Snow White and the Seven Dwarves; there's the full cast of characters from The Great Big Enormous Turnip.

Also on view is a fairy-tale family group including a woman clutching a snake who wears a crown. This is from Lithuania's perhaps most famous and most-researched fairy tale: Egle the Queen of Grass Snakes. It's complicated, but Egle's family pull several scams to get her out of having to marry Žilvinas, King of the Grass Snakes, followed by a horde of snakes turning up threatening to unleash a famine. Egle is finally coerced into marrying Žilvinas. But when she moves into his magical underwater realm, he turns out to have changed his form from that of a grass snake into that of a rather handsome human. They live there happily and have four children, until Egle's family brutally murder Žilvinas and Egle turns herself and her children into trees.

Lithuania was a pagan country with many well-documented gods and goddesses right up to 1387, and it's thought that the grass snake may have once been revered as a sacred animal. This group of statues at Grutas may be a parody of the traditional wooden carvings depicting the same fairy tale at a more mainstream folklore-themed tourist attraction down the road, the Lithuanian Foresters' Union's Forest Echo Museum.

There were no agit-prop shows on at the little open air theatre at Grutas Park when I was there on a Monday, while the loudspeakers that used to play Soviet "patriotic" songs were silent. (I'm told these are used only for anniversary celebrations or commemorations of now defunct festivals from the Soviet-era calendar.) The original plan was to bring customers to the gate in cattle trucks pulled by a Soviet-era locomotive, like prisoners being bought to the gulags, but the



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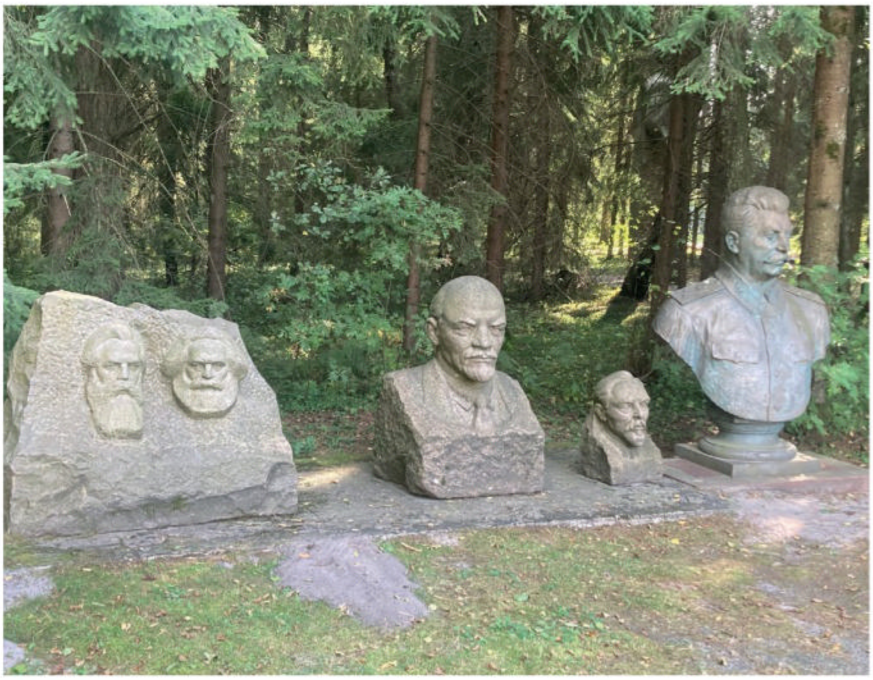
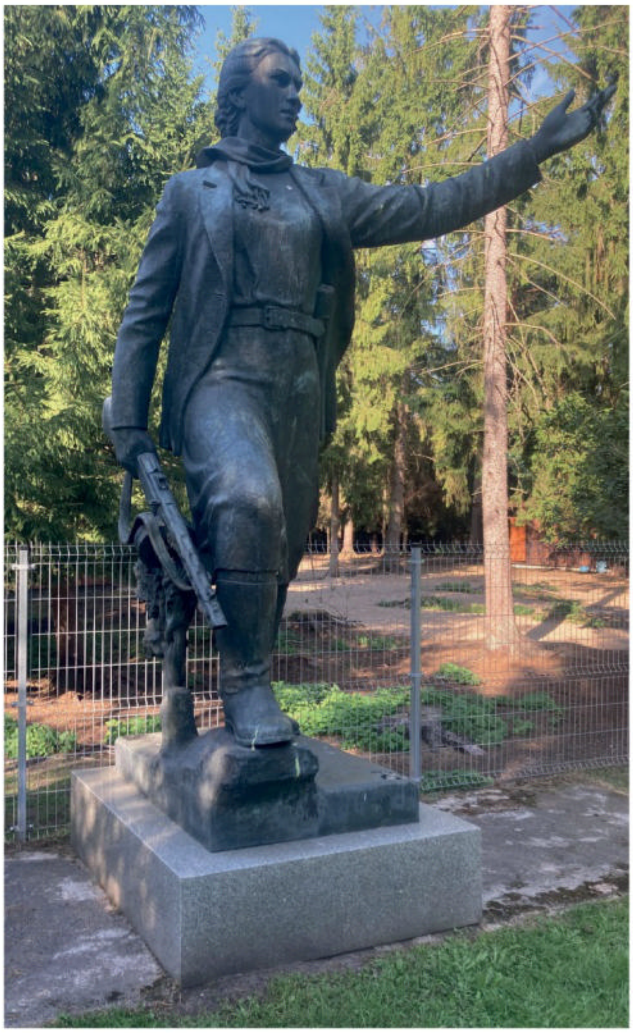




ABOVE LEFT: A locomotive from the time of the 1940s deportations. **ABOVE RIGHT:** (Left to right) Engels and K Marksas, Leninas, Mickevičius-Kapsukas, Stalinas. **BELOW:** Maryte or Marija Melnikait, a Lithuanian Soviet partisan shot by the Germans in 1942, aged 20.

"inappropriate" klaxon sounded at the Minister of Culture and the proposal was dropped.

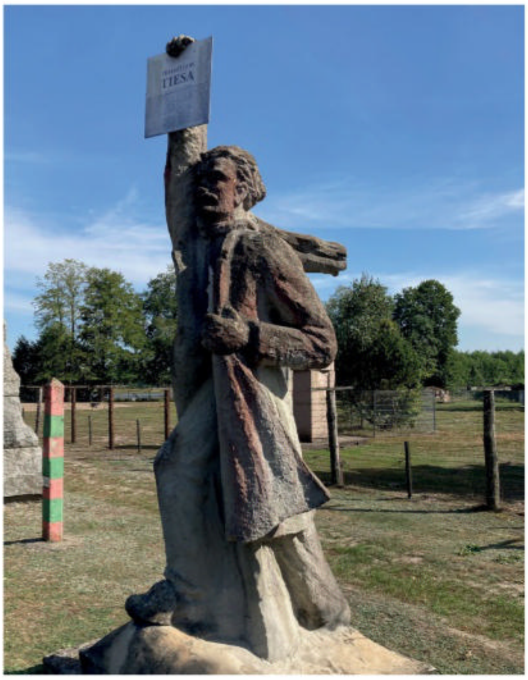
Parked at the entrance, though, there's a black Soviet freight loco with a red star on the front and a couple of freight wagons, said to be from period of the "deportations" – many Lithuanians were sent to the gulags when the Soviets drove the Germans out of Lithuania and re-occupied it at the end of World War II. And was the heavy use of barbed wire and the high fence of the enclosure at the edge of the Park mimicking the perimeter fence around a Soviet gulag, or was it just to stop particularly escape-prone exotic goats getting out?

While there seems to have been an endless demand for "Leninas" statuary, Grutas Park also has a statue of "K Marksas" (Karl Marx) who appears to rise out of his square plinth. There's also a double bust of Marx and Engels. And there are endless mourning war widows and soldiers at attention with bowed heads, from those many, many war cemeteries, and monuments to what was once known as the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1944, now downgraded in the signage to the "Soviet-German war".

Another figure who pops up a lot in the state-sponsored statuary of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic was the impressively moustachioed Vincas Mickevicius-Kapsukas. He was an old-school underground Communist in the last decades of Tsarist Russia, in a Lithuanian Communist party founded a decade before the Russian one. Mickevicius-Kapsukas served in short-lived Soviet republics set up by the "Reds" in Lithuanian territory during the Russian Civil War, before the Poles forced these out and he went into exile in Moscow, where he was on the board of the Comintern, the Soviet Union's operation to promote international revolution. The several statues of Mickevicius-Kapsukas at Grutas include – inevitably – one depicting him in conversation with "Leninas."

As well as "Leninas" and Mickevicius-Kapsukas, some relatively obscure local revolutionaries, middle-ranking Soviet staff officers or bureaucrats are immortalised in stone, concrete or bronze at Grutas. Some of these were "martyred" by the firing squads of the Tsarists, or the Nazi occupiers, while others, such as Karlos Pozela and most of the Central Committee of Communist Party of Lithuania, met their end facing the firing squads of the nationalist authoritarian regime that ruled Lithuania from 1926 onwards, in what is now euphemistically referred to in signage as "the upheaveal" (military coup), after which independent Lithuania had its own gulags and firing squads and locked up its cartoonists.

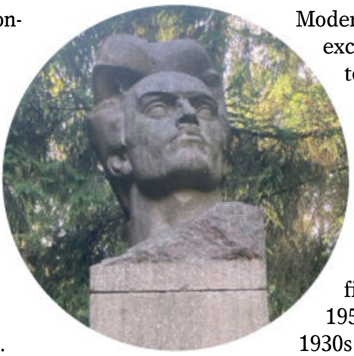
Some of the Lithuanians among the Soviet partisans operating behind enemy lines in "the Soviet-German War" went on to become much hated post-war Soviet enforcers in the Lithuanian SSR, which earned them immortality and a statue in Grutas Park. Ironically, a surprisingly high proportion of these brutal Soviet enforcers of Lithuanian origin would subsequently be among the many "disappeared" who were



PHOTOS: MATT SALUSBURY

ABOVE LEFT: A monumental soldier from a Soviet war memorial. **ABOVE RIGHT**: Communist agitator Zigmas Angarietis, apparently trying to flog a copy of *Morning Star*. **BELOW**: Karolis Požela, a Lithuanian Communist organiser executed by firing squad after the 1926 military coup. **BOTTOM**: War widow in traditional costume with a war orphan.

executed in Stalin's purges. Their statues at Grutas date from a slightly later, post-Stalinist period in which these former "non-persons" were posthumously rehabilitated and elevated to the divine status of Heroes of the Soviet Union.



There was one "Stalinas" statue and one large Stalin bust. These had presumably been taken out of storage – his image fell out of official favour in the 1950s. There was also a solitary statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky, another local boy, a Belorussian who was active in underground Communist circles in the Lithuanian city of Kaunas in the early years of the 20th century. Dzerzhinsky went on to set up the dreaded NKVD Soviet secret police force, precursor to the KGB. His image also disappeared from public view at around the same time as Stalin's. There's also a Soviet statue of Victory; she's missing an arm.

Those who have experienced harassment by over-zealous Marxist paper sellers on demos or outside Tube stations would be amused by the statue of Zigmas Angarietis, who is portrayed brandishing a copy of the early Lithuanian Communist newspaper *Tiesa*, which he founded.

There is a distinctly Baltic-Nordic vernacular style to many of the Soviet statues at Grutas, an Art Deco influenced Modernist look. The exception seemed to be statues and busts of "Leninas", all the work of sculptors with Lithuanian names, but which appeared fixed in an early 1950s or even 1930s style. This was despite many of the "Leninas" statues of Grutas dating from as recently as the 1980s, including one from 1986, when Gorbachev was already in power and enacting perestroika and glasnost.

Grutas has several statues of Maryte Melnikaite, the female Soviet partisan who once had streets and collective farms named after her – captured and shot by the Germans aged 20 in 1942 after just a few months as a guerrilla. The somewhat ranty signs at Grutas now view the Soviet partisans operating in Lithuania as "saboteurs" stealing from the population. There certainly seems to have been little enthusiasm for the Soviet partisans among Lithuania's population, given their agenda, which was basically the re-conquest of Lithuania and its forcible re-incorporation into the USSR.

Local Soviet partisans like Melnikaite fought in a complex, many-cornered guerrilla war between German Army and SS death squads and their Lithuanian collaborators, the Polish Home Army, the nationalist Lithuanian Territorial Defence Force and also random gangs of bandits taking advantage of the chaos.

The souvenir shop selling Soviet wooden toys and porcelain Lenin busts was closed when I visited on a Monday, perhaps as part of a "living history" re-enactment of Soviet-era customer service. There was a Soviet "militia" (police) car with hammer and sickle emblems on its doors, a Muscovite car in that kind of dull orange-grey colour the Soviets did so well. Also on display was a frighteningly insanitary mineral water dispensing machine of the type I remember putting a few kopeks into on the streets and squares of Moscow on a school trip there back in 1980. It had glasses that you pressed into a feeble water jet under the dispenser that was supposed to rinse them before re-use. A row of buttons allowed customers to choose from a variety of nasty, weak, sticky flavours to add to your sparkling mineral water.

Other curiosities on show include the tyre treads of a Red Army GAZ jeep and the prints of various issues of a Red Army boot, all set in concrete. There's a bar too, done up as a hunting lodge complete with trophies and stuffed wildlife. One of the weirder structures on the site is a building with pillars made from trees with the branches still on; its display cases are full of little statues of the Devil, like a little local version of the Devil Museum in the city of Kaunas to the north (**FT180:76-77**).

Grutas is dark tourism light, not really dark at all – just really, really odd, and pleasantly so. It seems the best way to make "memories of repression… bearable" is to put them in a beautiful tranquil forest setting, throw in some exotic animals and soak the place in an atmosphere of eccentricity and memorable quirkiness.

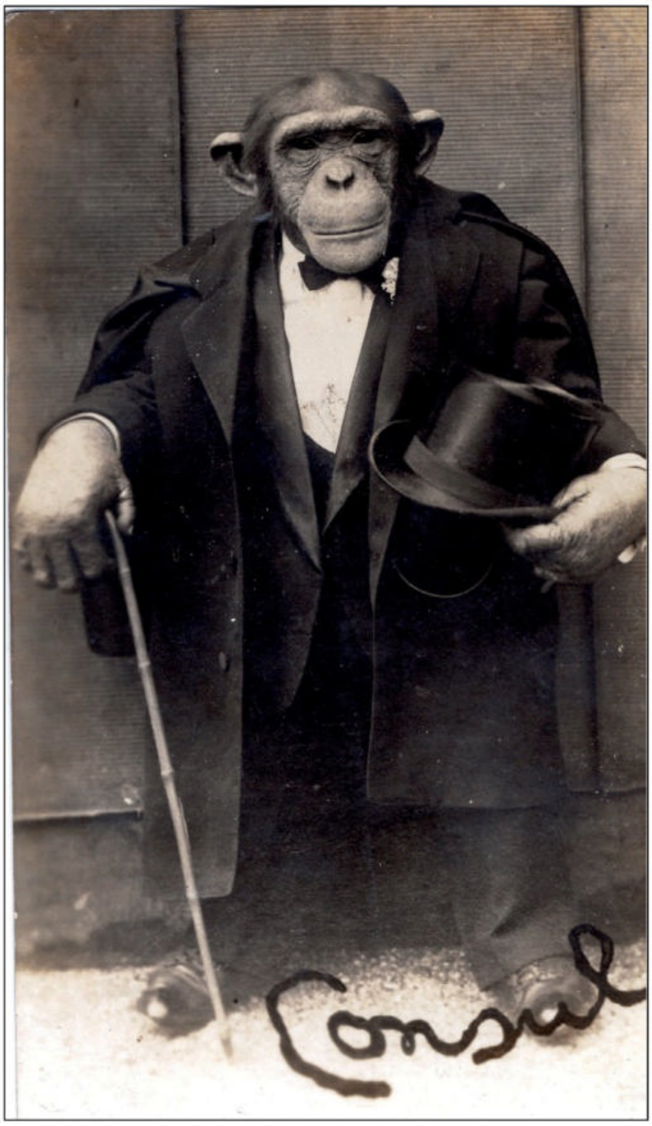
Grutas Park, adult admission €12. Bus M-203 from Vilnius bus station to Druskininkai then Bus 2A or Bolt cab (around €6) to Grutas Park. http://grutoparkas.lt/en_US/

MATT SALUSBURY is a regular FT contributor and the author of *Mystery Animals of Suffolk*. The book is available via bitternbooks.co.uk and bigcatsofsuffolk.com.

PECULIAR POSTCARDS

JAN BONDESON shares another deltiological discovery from his prodigious collection of postcards. This month's pictorial blast from the past explores the life and times of a Man Chimpanzee trapped in a world he never made!

52. CONSUL, THE MAN CHIMPANZEE



In December 1902, the *Daily News* could announce that a grand novel attraction was coming to the Royal Aquarium in London: 'Consul', the Man Chimpanzee. On stage, Consul wore faultless evening dress complete with a tall silk hat, smoked large cigars and drank quantities of beer and champagne. Only his simian features, an enthusiastic journalist wrote, distinguished him from his human brethren. According to an article in the *Graphic* newspaper, Consul shook hands with visitors, smoked, danced, ate with knife and fork, played football, rode a tricycle and drank various alcoholic beverages.

After his lengthy sojourn in London, Consul went to New York, and then to Paris, where he was very popular. In November 1903, Consul was back in London, this time at the Hippodrome. Dr Scott, who claimed the honour for bringing Consul to Britain, said that the celebrated chimpanzee had needed no training, since it was his natural tendency to imitate anything or anybody. His food consisted of rice, vegetables, eggs, soup, chicken, cakes and bread; he only occasionally took meat. He usually drank port wine, but also enjoyed champagne, and delighted in smoking a good Havana cigar.

After his second stay in London, Consul went to Berlin, where he was admired by the Imperial Family. The celebrated Man Chimpanzee died not long after this audience, not from the shock to his nervous system emanating from seeing Kaiser Bill at close quarters, but from a virulent attack of bronchitis. Constantly puffing away at the large cigars he was given by his false human friends cannot have benefited his health.

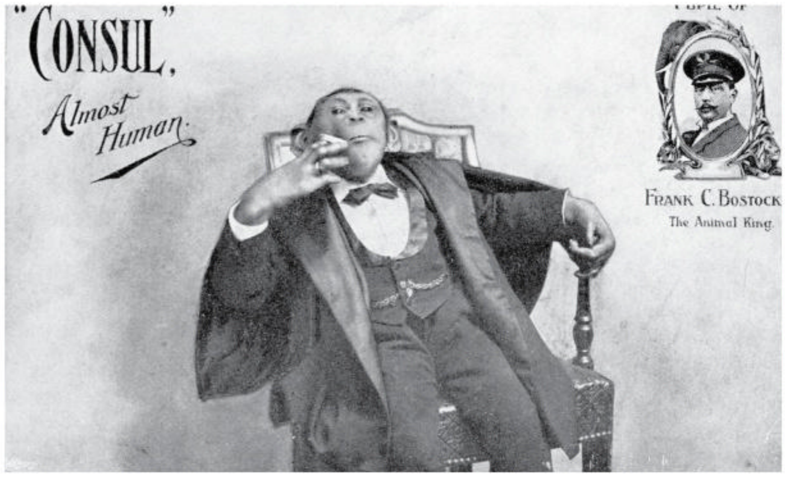
Consul's owner, the 'Animal King' Frank Bostock, was said to have been devastated at the doleful news from Berlin, although it was a consolation for him that the animal had been insured for not less than £20 000, and that Consul II, the replacement chimpanzee he had made sure to have in readiness, was undergoing an intensive training programme in New York. The body of Consul was embalmed, and his coffin was brought to Paris, where it lay in state for a week in front of a large crowd of mourners.

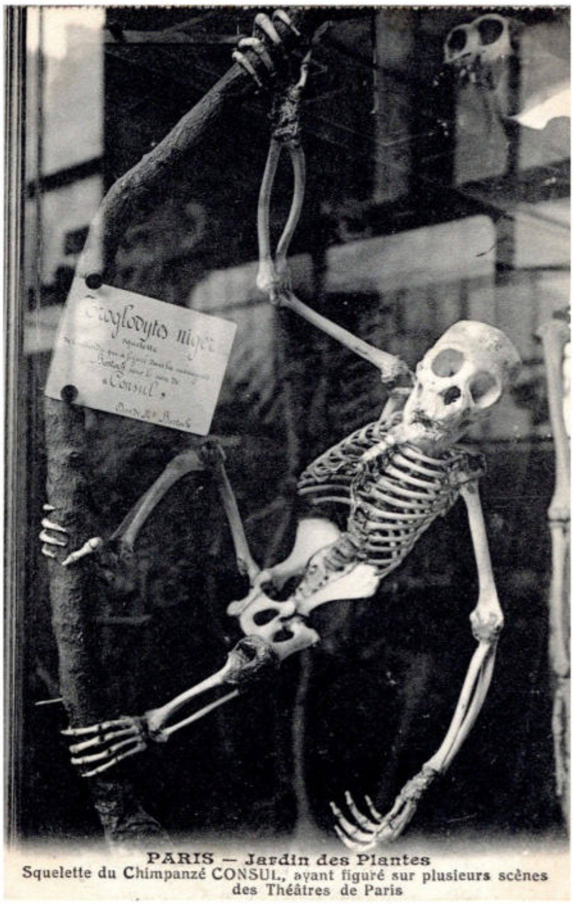
He usually drank port wine but also enjoyed champagne

By the time the skeleton of Consul had been mounted at the Museum of Comparative Anatomy in Paris, his replacement Consul II, advertised as the brother of the original performer, was active on the Berlin variety stage, brushing his teeth with a large toothbrush, and puffing away at a pipe. When Professor Hirschlaff demonstrated Consul II before the German Psychological Society, the animal showed off his tricks to great acclaim.

When Consul II was exhibited in London in April 1905, it was pointed out that his life was insured for £50 000: "If a monkey is worth £50 000, what is the price of the average man?" a disapproving *Gloucestershire Echo* journalist objected. The last we hear of Consul II is that when he held a reception at Anderton's Hotel in London in February 1909, the dotty alienist Dr Forbes Winslow declared that the Man Chimpanzee was the nearest approach to the 'missing link' he had ever seen.

At his headquarters, the Sheffield Jungle, Frank Bostock kept an entire menagerie of performing chimpanzees, all of whom were named Consul: there was 'Consul the Great', 'Consul Second', 'Young Consul' and several others. These apes were worked hard, being almost constantly on tour with Bostock's travelling shows; the British people's enthusiasm for humanoid chimpanzees was such that several Consuls were required to satiate it. The star of the troupe, 'Consul I', was in New York in 1907, before being exhibited in a show at the Earl's Court arena in April 1908. When Consul suavely lit a cigarette in front of King Edward, the


"CONSUL",
Almost Human.
PUPIL OF
FRANK C. BOSTOCK
The Animal King.


Troglodytes niger
Consul
PARIS — Jardin des Plantes
Squelette du Chimpanzé CONSUL, ayant figuré sur plusieurs scènes des Théâtres de Paris

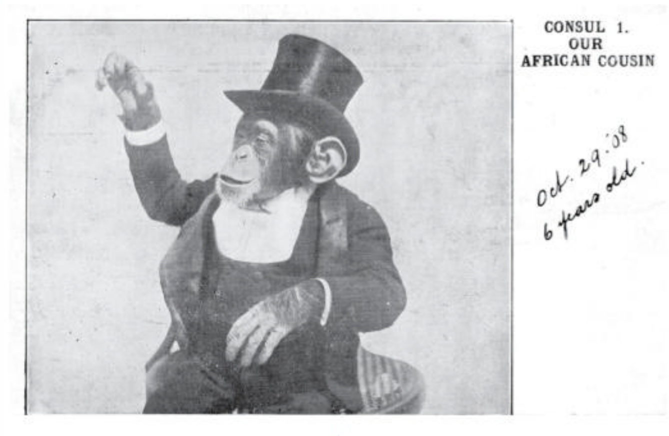
CONSUL I.
The Bostock Jungle, Earls Court Exhibition.
Direction: FRANK C. BOSTOCK.

CONSUL I.
The Bostock Jungle, Earls Court Exhibition.
Direction: FRANK C. BOSTOCK.

FACING PAGE: The original Consul. **TOP LEFT**: Another card showing Consul enjoying a smoke. **ABOVE RIGHT**: The skeleton of Consul at the Jardin des Plantes. **LEFT**: Two postcards featuring 'Consul I' during his marathon tour **BELOW**: Another card of Consul I, noting that the chimp was six years old in October 1908.

startled monarch exclaimed: "I have never seen anything like it before. Why, he smokes exactly like we do!" A few weeks later, the Man Chimpanzee took afternoon tea with the King and Queen, behaving most decorously.

From late 1908 until early 1914, Consul I went on a long and gruelling tour of the provinces, visiting almost every city and larger town in Britain. In December 1909, Frank Bostock was sued by Mrs Harriet Shepherd, in whose house Mr and Mrs Drowsky, a Russian couple who had charge of Consul during his travels, had lodged. Suddenly and without provocation, Consul had bounded into the kitchen and seized hold of Mrs Shepherd's baby, biting it hard in the leg. Since it was proved that Drowsky had given Mrs Shepherd £50 to keep the matter quiet, the case was won by the defendant, and the pædophobic ape's life was saved. After this narrow escape, Consul went on to perform at the Waverley Market Carnival in Edinburgh. As the lengthy tour went on, several picture postcards were printed to advertise him.


CONSUL 1.
OUR AFRICAN COUSIN
Oct. 29.'08
6 years old.

In 1913, the usurper 'Consul Pedro' threatened to outcompete the original veteran performer, but Consul I carried on touring to the end. The last we hear of him is that in January 1914, he was lying dangerously ill at the Rochdale Empire, attended by a doctor and a vet. Since the tour ended abruptly after this calamity, it would appear that the once-famous performer breathed his last in a dreary Northern town, far from his proper jungle habitat; yet another Consul had joined the great Consulate in the sky.

The tragedy in Rochdale also seems to have undermined, at long last, the British people's fascination with humanoid chimpanzees; the outbreak of the Great War did the rest, putting the Consuls on the 'retired' list, for good. Although Bostock exhibited a 'Consul III' in 1917, and although a 'Consul Junior' made a brief appearance in 1920, the once-flourishing market for 'educated' chimpanzees never recovered in the post-war period. In 1922, a journalist alleged, before a Select Committee in the House of Commons looking into the welfare of circus animals, that Consul had been regularly beaten by his Russian trainer, but Frank Bostock and HL Hilliard, the manager of the company that exhibited Consul, denied it vehemently. Mr Bostock said that during the 52 years he had been active as a menagerist, he had never seen anything that a fair-minded person would classify as cruelty to performing animals. Consul had been of an angry and morose disposition, he continued, and had once attacked Mr Bostock's brother without provocation, blackening both his eyes and biting his arm severely. If true, this story would seem to demonstrate that a person who trains a chimpanzee to perform various degrading tricks, runs a not inconsiderable risk of becoming the well-deserved victim of the animal's wrath and frustration.

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WHY FORTEAN?

FORTEAN TIMES is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing that some scientists tended to argue according to their personal beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox. **FT** toes no party line.

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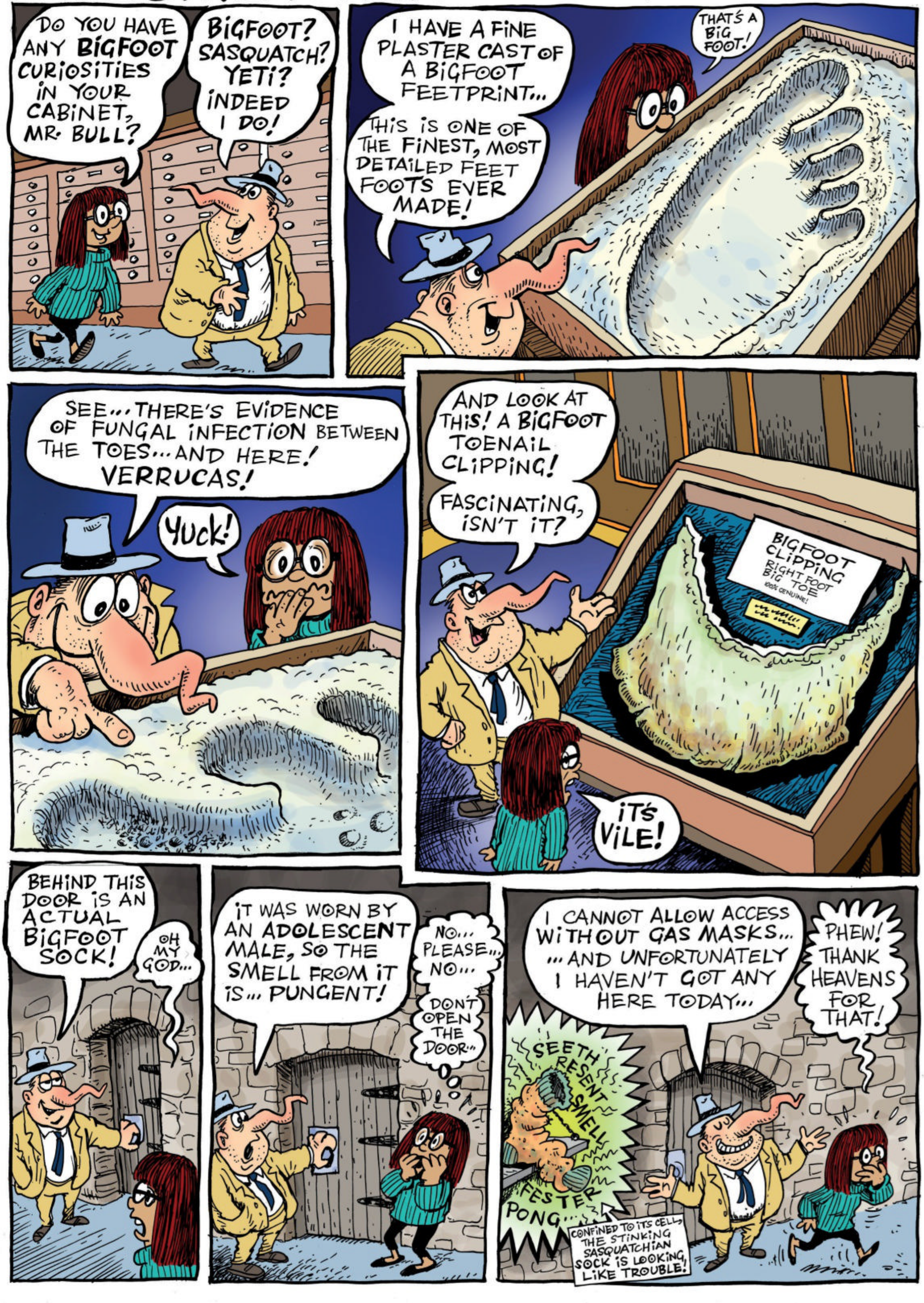
CABINET OF CURIOSITIES 3

HUNT EMERSON


DO YOU HAVE ANY BIGFOOT CURIOSITIES IN YOUR CABINET, MR. BULL?
BIGFOOT? SASQUATCH? YETI? INDEED I DO!
I HAVE A FINE PLASTER CAST OF A BIGFOOT FEETPRINT...
THIS IS ONE OF THE FINEST, MOST DETAILED FEET FOOTS EVER MADE!
THAT'S A BIG FOOT!
SEE... THERE'S EVIDENCE OF FUNGAL INFECTION BETWEEN THE TOES... AND HERE! VERRUCAS!
YUCK!
AND LOOK AT THIS! A BIGFOOT TOENAIL CLIPPING!
FASCINATING, ISN'T IT?
BIGFOOT CLIPPING RIGHT FOOT BIG TOE 100% GENUINE!
IT'S VILE!
BEHIND THIS DOOR IS AN ACTUAL BIGFOOT SOCK!
OH MY GOD...
IT WAS WORN BY AN ADOLESCENT MALE, SO THE SMELL FROM IT IS... PUNGENT!
NO... PLEASE... NO...
DON'T OPEN THE DOOR...
I CANNOT ALLOW ACCESS WITHOUT GAS MASKS... ...AND UNFORTUNATELY I HAVEN'T GOT ANY HERE TODAY...
PHEW! THANK HEAVENS FOR THAT!
SEETH RESENT SMELL
FESTER PONG...
CONFINED TO ITS CELL, THE STINKING SASQUATCHIAN SOCK IS LOOKING LIKE TROUBLE!

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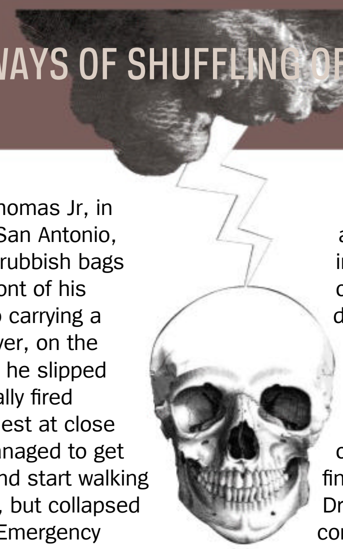
FORTEAN TIMES 457
ON SALE 17 APRIL 2025

STRANGE DEATHS

UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL



Harold Woodrow Thomas Jr, in his 60s and from San Antonio, Texas, was taking rubbish bags out to the bin in front of his property while also carrying a loaded rifle. However, on the way down his path he slipped over and accidentally fired the rifle into his chest at close range. Thomas managed to get to his feet again and start walking back to the house, but collapsed after a few yards. Emergency services called by a neighbour who had been alerted by the gunshot rushed Thomas to hospital, but he later died of his wound. *D.Mirror, 10 Aug 2024*.

Megan Garcia of Orlando, Florida, is suing Character.ai, a company that makes a customisable role-playing chatbot, claiming that their negligence and deceptive trade practices caused the wrongful death of her son, Sewell Setzer III, aged 14. Seltzer killed himself after allegedly becoming obsessed with a character he created using the AI, which he used day and night in the months before his suicide. He made a digital version of the *Game of Thrones* character Daenerys Targaryen that he texted dozens of times a day and spent hours talking to in his room every evening. Garcia alleges that Seltzer suffered from depression, exacerbated by his obsessive chatbot use, and that the AI then pushed him over the edge with its behaviour, asking him if he had a plan for killing himself; when he told it that he did, but wasn't sure if it would succeed or just cause him great pain, the chatbot allegedly told him "That's not a reason not to go through with it." In a press release about the case, Garcia said: "A dangerous AI chatbot app marketed to children abused and preyed on my son, manipulating him into taking his own life," and demanded accountability from Character.ai, its founders, and Google, who now own the company. *theguardian.com, 23 Oct 2024.*

After returning home following a visit to the bath house, Anand Yadav, 35, from Chhindkalo village in Chhattisgarh, India, complained of dizziness, then fainted. Family members rushed him to hospital, but he was pronounced dead on arrival, despite strenuous efforts by medics to revive him. Exactly why Yadav had died so suddenly remained a mystery until his postmortem. Then, pathologist Dr Santu Bag made an incision in Yadav's throat and discovered a 20cm (8in) long chick jammed in it, obstructing his trachea and oesophagus, which had caused death by asphyxiation. Remarkably, the chick was still alive, but it died later. "This is the first time I have encountered such a case in my career, having conducted over 15,000 postmortems. The findings shocked us all," said Dr Bag. Yadav's family have not commented on his death, but he had been married for several years without having children and it was believed that he had been consulting a tantrik, a kind of local mystic healer, for help. Such practitioners are frequently accused of dubious and dangerous occult practices, and locals believe that Yadav may have tried to swallow the chick as part of a fertility ritual. *hindustantimes.com, 17 Dec; scmp.com, 27 Dec 2024.*

Lester C Harvey Jr, 58, was part of a group of men going on a bear hunt in Lunenberg County, Virginia, who successfully cornered a large bear and chased it up a tree. The hunters then backed off and one of them shot the animal, which fell and crashed down on Harvey, who was standing about 10ft (3m) away from the bottom of the tree, leaving him with severe injuries. His fellow hunters provided first aid until emergency services arrived, but despite the efforts of two different hospitals, Harvey died several days later. *wtvr.com, 9 Dec 2024*.

A strange death was reported in the Vienna *Reichspost* on 27 July 1924: "A very strange accident has occurred in the municipality of Huszt [Hungary] recently. The innkeeper there, Michael Romler, opened a keg of beer, handed the first glass to a tax official, one of his regular customers, and drank the second glass himself. After a few minutes, both collapsed with terrible cramps and died soon afterwards. The gendarmerie immediately launched an investigation. The beer barrel was broken and the dead body of a viper was found inside, which had apparently crawled into the barrel before it was filled and had then drowned in the beer. It infected the entire contents of the barrel with its poison, and the autopsy of the two victims revealed that they were killed by snake venom. (It is generally assumed that snake venom only kills when it enters the blood: death probably occurred through carrion poisoning.)"

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